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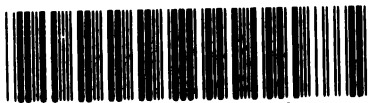
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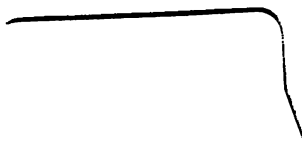
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THE
Skeleton in the Cupboard.



The
Skeleton in the Cupboard.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

By LADY SCOTT,

Authoress of 'The Henpecked Husband,' 'The Only Child,' &c.



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The Skeleton in the Cupboard.

CHAPTER I.

"I MUST write it," thought Mr. Bohun, and he resigned himself to circumstances; but it so happened that though one opportunity had escaped him, another offered itself before the end of the day.

The carriage stood at the door. It had been there ever since half-past twelve, in order that the departure should take place by the one o'clock train, but no sooner did Sir Felix realize that a long journey was before him than he declared he would not go, and it had required all Euphemia's persuasions, and Ponsford's calm determination

to induce him to make up his mind that he would start by the three o'clock train instead.

He had just been prevailed upon, when Mr. Bohun arrived, and then the enfeebled mind began to vacillate again, though he felt that he could but struggle in the net, there was no escape, so in speaking of it to his brother, he tried to make a virtue of the necessity, and thus rendered himself a still greater object of most painful thought and commiseration to Mr. Bohun.

However, there was no help for it (so Mr. Bohun thought), till all at once Ponsford was called from the room, and he then saw another chance, particularly as Sir Felix seemed to seize her absence to explain, in a lowered voice—

“But you will soon follow us, Guy? You will soon come back?”

“Now is the time!” thought Mr. Bohun, and turning quickly to his sister-in-law, he said, “Do not let me detain you, Lady Bohun. You must have a great deal to do. *I* will remain with my brother.”

There was something in Mr. Bohun so commanding when he chose, that Euphemia, unsupported by the indomitable Ponsford, quailed at his manner, and by her hesitation, betrayed the two kinds of alarm under which she was labouring—fear of defying him, and fear of leaving

them alone—but the former predominated and gained the day. With an attempt to curl her trembling lips into a smile, and thus conceal her indignation, she sailed out of the room, and eagerly sought her attendant.

“Ponsford,” she exclaimed, her eyes glittering with rage, “he has, in the politest way in the world, ordered me out of the room.”

“My lady?”

“Yes! Actually in my own house coolly begged me to leave him with Sir Felix.”

“And you *did*, my lady?”

“What could I do? You don’t know how he can look when he chooses. What could I do?”

“*I* should have remained, my lady.”

“Not if you had seen the look he gave me, Ponsford.”

“My lady,” said the abigail, with her head erect, and an air of defiance which she now often assumed unreprieved; “*I* am not afraid of Mr. Bohun.”

The arrow went straight to the mark, and Euphemia coloured to the tips of her fingers.

“Go then,” said she, “go yourself, and stand your ground if you can. *I* shall not enter the room again whilst that man is in it.”

“What is the use of my going now?” asked

Ponsford, with the sort of deferential insolence (if the contradictory term may be permitted), which had also begun of late to mark her manner to both Sir Felix and Lady Bohun; "the mischief may have been done whilst we have been talking here."

"And it also may *not* have been done," retorted Euphemia, who, when fairly roused, could condescend to combat a point even with a domestic; "so, Ponsford, you had better go and do your best. You will see in a moment if they are on matters of business, not that I believe you will stand your ground any more than I did."

Ponsford descended the staircase with a calm, deliberate step, and a fixed look of determination on her face.

There is no human being who possesses the faculty of exercising unusual influence or power over his fellow-man, who is not fully aware of it, and this knowledge gives of itself additional power.

"Felix," Mr. Bohun had begun, as the door had closed on the irate wife, "we have but a few moments to converse, so I must be very brief. I want to tell you why I came to town. I want to explain to you how very much happier I should be, had I some little *pied-à-terre* to which I could

retreat when the fit was on me, and with this view I.....”

Sir Felix raised himself in his chair, and caught at his brother's hands—“To leave me, Guy?” he cried, in a low, agitated whisper; “to leave me *now*—at such a crisis—in my state—to leave me to the tender mercies of a crowd of.....of..... harpies—I mean strangers—friends—relations—whatever you call them—to leave me *now*!”

He was trembling all over in a moment.

“Not to leave you, Felix, *now*,” said Mr. Bohun, retracting when he saw the unexpected effect his words had produced; “but to have some certain abode in town, to which I could run up when I chose—to which you also would have equal access. I only wished to consult you on the subject before my plans became definite. All our lives we have held counsel together on subjects of mutual interest, and I will not act in this measure until I lay before you my reasons.”

Sir Felix suddenly covered his eyes with his hands.

“I see, I see them clearly,” he murmured; “and I can grieve, but I cannot wonder; neither can I put a spoke in the wheel, though it grind me to death.”

There was an anguish in his voice which went

straight to his brother's heart. It changed all his feelings, but it did not shake his resolutions. He felt he must still act, for the sake of his own dignity, but it must be done with more caution, and some secrecy. Sir Felix was evidently unequal to any agitation, and Mr. Bohun therefore modified his announcement until it took more the form of an idea, than a decision.

"Felix," said he, gently, "you must not take it in this light. You cannot imagine that I would not rather cut off my right hand than oppose any wishes you may have on the subject; but it has sometimes occurred to me that, happily surrounded now, as you are, by new interests....."

"A—h!" said Sir Felix between his teeth, with a long-drawn sigh; and then he compressed his lips tightly, as if to prison back some sentence which might as well gnaw at his heart, instead of finding utterance for no available purpose.

"It occurred to me, my dear Felix," continued Mr. Bohun, "that under these circumstances, you would not miss me so much were I occasionally to....."

The door opened, closed, and the steady footfall approached, and paused behind the arm-chair. Mr. Bohun fixed his eye on his brother. Sir Felix was as white as a sheet.

"If you please, Sir Felix, her ladyship begged me to tell you the carriage is at the door, and I have put in your cushions."

"Felix," said Mr. Bohun, his eye unflinching under a gaze which he felt to be upon him, "I have still a few words to say. We will request Mrs. Ponsford to leave the room until our conversation is concluded. You have yet abundance of time to save the train."

Sir Felix never spoke. Ponsford never moved.

"You can leave us," said Mr. Bohun, looking up at her. Not a muscle of her face stirred, nor did she show the least signs of any intention of obeying.

"Felix, I will take care that you do not lose the train. Will you desire your servant to leave us?"

"Yes—yes....." said Sir Felix, hurriedly; "we have not done yet. Thank you, Ponsford. Yes—we are coming directly—no hurry—thank you—you need not wait."

"You have not too much time, Sir Felix," persisted that calm voice, in tones of the clearest precision; "her ladyship is waiting for you in the dining-room."

The invalid looked bewildered, and then cast a despairing glance at Mr. Bohun. The latter was

now nerved to the attack. He turned full upon Ponsford. "Sir Felix will join her ladyship in good time," said he; "for yourself, you will be so good as to leave us. I think I said so before."

"Pardon me, Mr. Bohun; I am waiting for Sir Felix, by her ladyship's orders."

"Felix!" exclaimed his brother, "is this insolence to be borne? Do you permit this person such liberty and licence?"

"No, no, no!" was the querulous reply, whilst the object of discussion stood unmoved, all but smiling; "no, no. Mr. Bohun has something to say to me.....you had better go, Ponsford....."

"Excuse me, Sir Felix, but you must really be so good as to let me assist you."

"Must? *must*, to Sir Felix?" cried Mr. Bohun. "Mrs. Ponsford, I will thank you to recollect that that word shall never be used to my brother again in my presence. Stand aside, if you please."

She was stooping over Sir Felix; she had his hand in hers, and had drawn his arm through her own; she had half raised him from the chair; but now the powerful frame of Mr. Bohun interposed, and his triumph would have been complete, when suddenly Sir Felix looked up in her face; —what he saw there, who can tell? who can tell

how, in a state of mental weakness, a single glance from some particular eye can affect us? who can tell how a look can startle? a whisper turn the blood cold? What Sir Felix saw in those strangely-cold eyes, Mr. Bohun could not tell, but the effect was instantaneous and magical.

"Thank you, Guy, very, very much; but no—let her do it—thank you. We must defer what we had to say just for the present, for perhaps after all I had better go, and not keep Euphemia—it certainly makes one very nervous, running things to the last moment. I really had rather go now that I am once up."

And go he did—not on Ponsford's arm, for that Mr. Bohun effectually prevented; but he tottered out of the room and along the hall, Ponsford following closely in the rear, and certainly in the hall stood Lady Bohun, waiting, biting her lips, and watching their progress as though she would read the inmost thoughts of the whole trio.

In her hand she held a wine-glass. "Ponsford," said she, "the tonic," and the waiting-woman, gliding past with a half-uttered apology, took it from her, a few low sentences being exchanged between herself and her mistress as she did so.

"Felix," said Mr. Bohun, in a voice which

only his brother could hear, "you must get rid of that woman."

The words which the invalid spoke in answer were few, but the tone in which they were uttered, and the expression of his face as he met Mr. Bohun's appealing look, haunted his brother for many a long day; he could not get its helplessness out of his head; the words were merely, "Guy, *I cannot!*" but till that moment, nothing would have induced Mr. Bohun to believe the amount of influence which she, of whom he always thought as "the vampire," had gained over her charge.

The fact was, illness had made him her charge, and therein lay her power, for she had become as necessary to his comfort, as her assistance in every kind of duty or dilemma had rendered her necessary to Lady Bohun.

"She has, indeed, begun her deadly work," thought he, as he stood on the pavement watching their last arrangements, and recalled to his mind Miss Maynard's words at Bohun Court. "She has begun; who knows where she will end? People do not seek to gain such influence as this for nothing; but I am glad I have witnessed it, for now I see my way. No separate home for me after this."

And now they were fairly settled in the carriage. Sir Felix had taken his tonic (orange juice and water), had felt sure it had given him the required strength, since Ponsford always declared he looked "himself" again, the moment he had taken it; had suffered himself to be placed on an air-pillow, which he disliked beyond everything, though Ponsford said it prevented his being jolted; had had a down one put behind his back, which (it being August) half smothered him, and was now pronounced ready.

"Good-bye, Mr. Bohun," said Euphemia, kissing her glove gracefully, "we hope to have a large, gay party at Bohun Court the week after next; you must not desert us; you will, perhaps, have transacted all your business by that time?"

"It is transacted," was his cool and startling reply, "and," he added, pointedly, "I shall be at home again *to-morrow*."

CHAPTER II.

WE hear a great deal now-a-days in musical circles, of "songs without words;" we see a great deal more in all sorts of circles, of "*looks* without words."


Mr. Bohun hardly knew the full significance of the term until he had been an eye-witness of the telegraphic purposes to which looks were put between the fair Euphemia and her trusty Ponsford.

When he delivered himself of the sentence, "I shall be at home again to-morrow," not a syllable of acknowledgment did it receive. This of itself was not flattering, but the glance of lightning which shot from one of the female occupants of the carriage to the other, was still less so, for it told of mingled anger, annoyance, and dismay. But it served one good purpose at all events; it showed him how much his presence at Bohun Court was required, and strengthened him in his

resolution not to desert his brother in the state to which he was reduced, even though it were to the cost of his own comfort and independence.

When we have cut and dried a plan which has long been agitating in our minds; when we have gathered together all the floating particles of pros and cons, and doubts, and indecisions; when we have condensed them into the mass of one magnanimous resolution,—to have them all scattered to the winds again by a sudden tempest, is bewilderment to one's senses; and so felt Mr. Bohun, as he saw the carriage drive off, watched it out of sight, and then turned "back to busy life again," *i. e.*, turned to walk down to his Club, and ruminate over the events of the morning.

From the remote period of his boyhood, he did not recollect ever to have had his "angry passions" so stirred up as they had been that day. To the masters of Bohun Court the insolence of a servant was a thing unknown. Dismissal on the spot would have been the fate of any menial who had presumed to return even an answer to any order or reproof issued by Sir Felix or his brother; but the upper servants of the house being of long standing, and holding supreme authority over those beneath them, such a thing was, as I said, unknown.



No wonder, then, that Mr. Bohun's blood boiled up, hot and impetuous, at the deliberate insult offered him by a person of whose determined disposition he had had long experience—one beneath whose mysterious and irresistible influence he knew that her two former employers had quailed.

"But not I, neither shall Felix," was his inward reflection, and it was with a view of interposing himself as a protection against the chance of such a thralldom that he now resolved to give up his cherished scheme of chambers at the Albany, and first turned his steps in that direction that he might at once decline them.

In Bond Street, he encountered Mr. Blackstone. He was a good, easy, quiet man, so little like his daughter, that, fortunately, he did not remind Mr. Bohun of her, and perhaps to this fact he owed the cordiality of his reception. Mr. Bohun accosted him with all the more alacrity, since the meeting saved him a journey into the City.

"I have been looking for you everywhere, my dear sir," began Mr. Blackstone; "at your Club, and at your lodgings, and was now hurrying up to try and find you and Sir Felix together, that we might expedite matters regarding that five thousand which Sir Felix wishes to sell out."

"They are gone," said Mr. Bohun, quietly.

"Gone?" The genuine start of surprise with which the announcement was received, plainly showed how abrupt and unexpected had been this move. "Gone! are you quite sure?"

"Certain—for I saw them off. Is it possible you did not know it? Were you not at the Crystal Palace yesterday? Was it not all arranged there?"

Mr. Bohun threw out this suggestion accidentally; it was an impression he had, from the little he had been able to gather.

"Mrs. Blackstone was there, and a very large party, but I never join such gaieties. I am not so young and lissome as my daughter," said the old man, with a smile—not one of the objectionable smiles, but one of a kind, benignant, half-sad character—the smiles you often see on old people's faces. "But you surprise me, and Euphemia ought to have told me, but she is so very thoughtless. Certainly Mrs. Blackstone never said a word on the subject, or I should have recollected, and gone to the house the first thing this morning. Dear, dear! now this is excessively provoking, for I wanted both your signature and that of Sir Felix to-day; the owner of the house happens to be in town, and when all parties are on the spot....."

"What house?" asked Mr. Bohun.

"The house they have had this spring—the house they have just left; don't you know?"

"I know the house they have been inhabiting as residents of a season."

"Yes; well, that is the house; its price is five thousand pounds, fixtures not included, which will run it up to a pretty penny: however, my daughter has set her heart on it, and when she does that, I know of old, to my cost, that money will not stop her, poor girl. But, as I said, people know their own affairs best—the price of it is this five thousand....."

"My dear sir," interrupted Mr. Bohun, at last, as the garrulous old man trotted by his side, "I beg your pardon, but are you aware that you are talking to me in an unknown tongue?"

Mr. Blackstone looked up innocently.

"That I have no idea what you mean? I know Sir Felix wanted five thousand pounds sold out of the funds; he once broached the subject to me, and I understood it was to invest it to greater advantage, but from what you say, I gather that....."

"That they want to buy that house; my daughter has set her mind on a house in town—a positive absurdity to my mind, only I never in-

terfere in the affairs of married people—a positive absurdity for people who can give their twenty guineas a week for the season, and then shake off all responsibility and liability, and all that sort of thing; but, as I said, I never interfere, unless officially.”

“I do not like this,” said Mr. Bohun; “I do not like having a project thrust before me at the eleventh hour, and my signature demanded for the disposal of a sum of money, when I have had no time to consider whether it be a wise investment or no.”

“But, my dear sir, do you really mean you have never been consulted on the question of the house?”

“Never—though I confess I have never had five minutes’ private conversation with my brother since I came to town! Did the wish for a house in town originate with him?”

“No, with Phemy—with my daughter,” said Mr. Blackstone, candidly, and then a troubled look came over his face.

“I thought not with Sir Felix—his whole heart is wrapped up in Bohun Court. I cannot see why they want a house in town,” mused Mr. Bohun.

And now they stood before the entrance to the

Albany, and the latter turned to wish his companion good morning, for this new piece of information had by no means tended to smooth his ruffled plumes, and he felt savage with even the inoffensive being by his side. But in doing so, the troubled expression of Mr. Blackstone's face caught his eye, and he misinterpreted it.

"Do not think," said he "that I am annoyed at what you have told me. I am only sorry they did not treat me more as one of themselves, and allow me to be taken into their counsels. However, as you say yourself, best not interfere in the affairs of married people."

"True, very true, Mr. Bohun; but it is not that that is vexing me. In the first place, it is that I was not told of their intended departure. I am *sure* Mrs. Blackstone never told me, or I should not have let it escape my memory. And in the second place.....I don't know whether I ought to say it.....and of my Phemy, too !....."

"We will take another turn," said Mr. Bohun, for he saw that the old man had something troubling his mind which would be told more easily if he were not face to face with his companion. And he judged rightly, for no sooner had they begun to pace the pavement, than Mr. Blackstone continued.

"I have been very uneasy lately, Mr. Bohun, though I have kept it all to myself. I don't know why I had rather trust you with the cause than my own wife, except that Mrs. Blackstone is in the habit of looking upon a peculiar feeling of mine as a monomania. I will tell you what it is. All my life long I have had the greatest dread of placing such complete confidence in any of my dependents, that I thereby invest them with a power which in time becomes an influence. I remember, Mr. Bohun, when I was young, there was an old clerk in my father's counting-house—he had risen from having once been a domestic servant—who held my father and all our family in such a state of thralldom, that I always said to myself, from quite a boy, if ever I have servants of my own, they shall be young ones, and I will have unlimited sway over them; and strangely enough, just before my daughter's marriage, when I heard Mrs. Blackstone and my Phemy expatiate so warmly on the merits of this Mrs. Ponsford....."

"The vampire again!" ejaculated Mr. Bohun to himself.

"And when," continued Mr. Blackstone, "they told me, as an additional reason for taking her, that she had been *confidential* servant in her last

two families, strangely enough my words in answer were those of caution to Phemy to preserve, under any circumstances, her own supremacy; and the expression I used was, No tyranny like the tyranny of a servant!"

The old man paused to take breath. Mr. Bohun was silent, and, after a moment's interval, the former continued.

"Mr. Bohun, my daughter has not done this; I see it with regret and alarm. That woman is dangerous and intriguing. I have learnt more of her than she thinks I know, and my opinion of her is bad, so much so, that I have actually taken upon myself to speak to my daughter on the subject, and all the satisfaction I have received is, Phemy's vehement assurance that Ponsford makes herself so extremely useful, that it would be utterly impossible to do without her. Now, to cut the matter short, my dear sir, the fact is this, it is the old story of my boyhood over again, and my daughter is as much under the influence of that woman as ever my father was under that of our villainous old clerk."

"I have no doubt of it," exclaimed Mr. Bohun, warmly, more warmly than he would have spoken had he given himself time to consider, but he was almost thinking aloud.

"Then you have seen it?" asked Mr. Blackstone, sharply.

"Yes, I confess I have."

"You relieve me!" said the old man, seeming to breathe more freely; "if you are aware of it, a load is lifted off my mind, for I can place my child under your watchful eye now, secure that you will not permit that woman to tyrannise over her."

Mr. Bohun smiled in his heart. The idea of the fair Euphemia's allowing herself to be placed under *his* watchful eye, when the study of her life appeared to be, how she might best elude it! But to rob the anxious old father of this little bit of flattering unction would have been cruel, so he said nothing, and Mr. Blackstone continued, confidentially,

"It is that woman, my dear sir, who has made my daughter want a house in town. I was against it, for my daughter is young, and gay, and good-looking enough, and Sir Felix is not in sufficiently robust health to go about with her, so that I hear of her flaunting here, there, and everywhere with that silly booby—I am sorry to call him so openly by his right name—my nephew, Sydney Aylmer. I don't like it, and two months of it is quite as much gaiety as is good for her; but no—I was

over-ruled—yes, and over-ruled, I verily believe, by that woman, Ponsford !”

“ But what object could she have in wishing to be more in town ?” asked Mr. Bohun.

“ A lover, I strongly suspect—a lover in ambush, for whom she is feathering her nest—a fellow who owns some chambers here in the Albany—some relation, I believe.”

“ Indeed !” said Mr. Bohun, an odd sort of feeling creeping over him ; “ and what may his name be, do you know ?”

“ That I don’t know. Ponsford, I suppose. But not to weary you further on this subject, do you decline your sanction to this purchase ?”

“ Certainly not, if it is my brother’s wish.”

“ Oh ! he acquiesced, most decidedly. But are you prepared to sign the papers to-day ?

“ I had rather communicate with Sir Felix first. I am going down to-morrow.”

“ To-morrow the owner will be gone,” said Mr. Blackstone, looking blank ; “ and I wanted to nail him, because I have an idea that I might possibly get the fixtures thrown in, if I strike while the iron is hot.”

“ I cannot well get away to-day,” returned Mr. Bohun ; “ I have several little matters to settle in town.”

"Then I had better go down with the papers myself, provoking as it is," said Mr. Blackstone; "I shall then obtain the signature of Sir Felix, provided I come to terms with the owner of the house; that will be a good two hours' work. I cannot be off before six o'clock. I shall reach Bohun Court, when?"

"At nine."

"And return the first thing to-morrow, in time for your signature, without interfering with your plans of going down yourself. Thank you, my dear sir. Then all is settled. I am much annoyed with my daughter, but her thoughtlessness is incorrigible, so I wish you a very good morning, with many apologies for such an unconscionable detention."

Long before he had finished this sentence, Mr. Bohun was within the walls of the Albany.

CHAPTER III.

It is not pleasant to have your lot cast amongst people who evidently consider you a nonentity, and who, moreover, take every opportunity of thrusting the fact upon your notice. In matters where really it did not concern him, Mr. Bohun treated this contempt with indifference, but in the present case it *did* happen to concern him, for the money in question could not be disposed of without his sanction and signature, and yet this had been coolly taken as a matter of course, and he had not even been consulted.

It was true it was in his power to decline, but it was not in his nature to stoop to an act of such petty revenge. No; like all the other small insults, he must "grin and bear it." He had had a long reign of exemption from the ordinary worries of the world. He supposed he must have his share, and bear them.

But his greatest grievance was giving up the cherished hope of a home of his own. That really did completely upset his equanimity. Nothing less urgent than the wretched state in which he saw his brother sinking, could have reconciled him to the self-sacrifice; but, singularly enough, every circumstance that had occurred of late, however trivial, had tended to convince him that he was right, so having put his hand to the plough, he would not now look back.

On arriving at the door of the chambers for which he had been in treaty, he inquired for the person he had seen on former occasions.

"He is out, sir," was the answer, "and not expected back again till the end of the week; but if you are Mr. Bohun, sir, I was told to take your orders all the same as if he were here, sir."

"I thank you," said Mr. Bohun; "but my plans are so changed, that I shall be obliged to communicate in writing. To whom shall I address my letter?"

"To Mr. Ponsford, if you please, sir, and it will be forwarded."

Mr. Bohun turned away, and drew a long breath as he emerged out of the passage into the street.

"I thought as much!" was his inward excla-

mation, as he hurried on; "a something told me I was on the brink of a disaster, which this actually would have been, and my escape is next to a miracle."

Meanwhile, Mr. Blackstone, on the hottest of August afternoons, was hurrying to and fro, and making all his preparations for his departure. He had to send a clerk to The Laurels to apprise his wife of the cause of his absence at dinner, for so regular was his appearance at the station every evening with his little basket of fish in his hand, that had he failed to arrive, the very coachman would have been ready to fall off the box, unless a living representative were sent to explain all about it. He had then to see the owner of the house in —— Square, and beat him down about the fixtures. He had next to borrow, of another of his clerks, paraphernalia for the night, and lastly, he had to rush to the station, and reach it just in time to catch the train.

Mr. Blackstone had long retired from active business, but the old habit of going to the City, and keeping up old friendships with the firm that still bore his name, not to mention the weakness he had for choosing his own fish, still clung to him; besides, for the Bohun family, he invariably transacted all business himself.

"But," muttered he, as he curled himself into a corner of the railway carriage, "I am too old for it—too old to be hurried about from pillar to post like this. Phemy is more thoughtless than a child. I never will do it again, even for her."

Mr. and Mrs. Blackstone had naturally had a great anxiety to see their Phemy's home. As yet, it had been always a pleasure, a very great pleasure, in prospect, and in a fortnight's time they had promised to follow her to Bohun Court in proper style, with maid and man, &c., &c. It was, therefore, no small additional vexation to the old gentleman to have to show himself to his daughter's grand establishment for the first time in all the unbecoming discomfort of a flying visit, arriving at an inconvenient hour like a thief in the night, and instead of the carriage being sent to the station to meet him with all the honours, driving up in a hired conveyance and having to announce himself, ignominiously.

Fortunately, old Burley saw the lamp flash on his face as he got out, and threw open the great doors with a wide welcome. And a wider, warmer welcome still, met him in the fine old dining-room where he found Sir Felix and his daughter sitting cozily in the twilight, for it was only just growing dark.

But even this did not compensate, and as soon as Sir Felix was wheeled off to bed, he gave the fair Euphemia a scolding.

"It was so inconsiderate of her," he said; "so thoughtless, so completely regardless of the comfort and convenience of everybody; besides which, it was a breach of the common respect which her parents had a right to expect, thus to leave London without the slightest intimation to any one of her family."

Unfortunately, Euphemia was in no humour that evening to receive a good scolding with either grace or benefit to herself. She had been, as she thought, more than usually aggravated that day, and even the quiet of a *coupé*, and the luxurious reception at Bohun Court (where, in the space of a few hours the house had been made to look as though only left the day before), had not sufficed to smooth down her ruffled plumes. Mr. Bohun's parting words, so totally unexpected, and the elation of spirits into which they had thrown Sir Felix, as well as her own inward doubts and fears as to what could have thus induced him to change all his plans, had put Lady Bohun into a thorough ill-humour. During the half-hour, too, when she was changing her dress

for dinner, Ponsford had not thrown oil upon the waters.

"What on earth could have made that man alter his mind so suddenly, Ponsford?"

"I am sure, my lady, I have no idea, unless it was something Sir Felix might have said when your ladyship left Mr. Bohun alone with him."

"Oh no! Ponsford, they could not have had time, I sent you down so immediately; did you happen to say anything about our buying that house?"

"Not a word, my lady, but....."

"But what?"

"Mr. Bohun has so long had the rule over Sir Felix, my lady, that you cannot wonder at his not intending to resign it easily."

"Not intending, indeed! I think we shall soon decide that point! and as for the rule, he has never had the rule since *I* came into the house I flatter myself."

"No, my lady," returned the gentle voice; "but what a struggle it has been for your ladyship, quite embittering the peace and tranquillity of your life."

"So it has," cried Euphemia, tearing on her gloves in her own passionate way, "that man is

the very plague of my existence, but, Ponsford, we will foil him yet."

"Yes, my lady," (very placidly).

"And I'll have the house full a week sooner than I intended."

"Yes, my lady."

"And this is the moment, Ponsford, for getting rid of that dog. Send him down to the kennels before Mr. Bohun comes to-morrow, for I heard his horrid howl as we drove up the avenue."

"I beg your pardon, my lady, but that is more than I dare do. Mr. Burley would not permit the order to be executed even if I gave it."

"Very well," said Lady Bohun, outwardly calm, "then I will give it myself;" and as she went in to dinner, Burley received the order in silent submission, Sir Felix offering no opposition, as, faint and weary, he tottered into the room, leaning on her firm young arm.

Thus it was, in something like a desperate mood, that Mr. Blackstone found the lady of Bohun Court; desperate in her determination that from henceforth no soul but herself should ever have "the rule" beneath that roof. That short and hurried conversation with Ponsford was the brand that had set light to the fire and spirit with which she replied to her father's reproof, and

even *he* looked rather aghast when she boldly denied the right of Mr. Bohun to know the movements of herself and Sir Felix.

"As for mamma, when I was with her at the Crystal Palace, I had not talked Sir Felix overI mean I had not gained his consent..... so, of course, I was not justified in saying anything about it, otherwise, naturally, mamma would have been the very first to know, and I should have made a point of telling her; but Mr. Bohun! my dear papa!" (and here Euphemia put on a face of childish impertinence and petulance) "what business is it of his?"

"Business, my dear? goodness! business?" Mr. Blackstone was quite shocked. "Do you mean that you are to take important steps in life, and never consult one of the chief parties concerned?"

"Mr. Bohun chief party in any of *my* affairs?" asked the lady, with the air of an empress.

"Inasmuch, my dear, as you certainly cannot buy this house, on which it seems you have set your heart, without his signature, and without his....."

"Send the papers to him," interrupted her highness, "and let him sign them."

"And without his sanction," added her father, coolly. Euphemia's eyes flashed.

"Has he the power of refusing?" she asked.

"Most assuredly he has, my dear."

"*Has* he refused?" she exclaimed.

"No; but, my dear, what is this tone that you adopt whilst speaking of Mr. Bohun? I don't understand it; I don't like it. What does it mean?"

"Papa, I don't choose that man to interfere in....."

"That man? Euphemia, you surprise me."

"I cannot bear his dodging us about wherever we move. There is no peace of one's life for him. I declare, as Ponsford says....."

"Ha!" interrupted her father, sharply, "that's it, is it? Ponsford—I am glad you named her. My dear, I want to have a few words with you on that subject. If Mrs. Ponsford has had the impertinent audacity to try and set you against Mr. Bohun.....no, my dear, don't interrupt me, but when I have had my turn, then you shall speak—if, by some strange and inexplicable want of self-respect and dignity on your part, you have suffered a woman in her position to venture to say a word to you against Mr. Bohun, I cannot express whether I feel most disgusted with her, or displeased with yourself; but this I do know, that the sooner Sir Felix sweeps her out of the

house the better, and I should be one of the very first to urge and advise him to do so. I remember, when I was a boy, there was a clerk in my father's office....."

Euphemia had stood a good deal, but this was an impossibility.

"Papa, forgive me for reminding you that that story is not unknown to me, but it bears no analogy to Ponsford. Besides, we were talking of this purchase, and these law papers, and my thoughtlessness, for which, I do assure you, I am most truly sorry....."

"But, my dear Phemy, whilst once on the subject of that most dangerous influence, which chills my very blood when I think of it....."

"Dear papa, in this house no influence exists but mine, and I really believe it is because I have for once successfully exerted it in defiance of all opposition, that you are now pleased to come all the way from London on purpose to scold me!"

There was a winning way about her when she chose, and a deep artfulness in her caressing manner as she cautiously and playfully led her father away from the dangerous ground towards which he had boldly advanced a step,

that insensibly wiled him from his subject; she bewildered his ideas—she made him forget Ponsford, and overlook her tone whilst speaking of Mr. Bohun; and as these were points on which she felt herself undeniably weak, she exerted the full power of her coaxing abilities to bring the old man back to the plain fact of the purchase of the house, and immerse his thoughts in the matter-of-fact depths of £. s. d.

Possibly in this she might not have succeeded had her father had more time to spare, but he had none. Every moment was precious, and in order to conclude the bargain he had made with regard to the house in ——— Square, it was absolutely necessary he should be in town early the following day, certainly before the evening, but, if practicable, by twelve o'clock.

But this was not practicable, or else Euphemia so managed that she put it out of the old gentleman's power, for she insisted on driving him to the station herself (armed with all his papers, duly signed, and only wanting the signature of Mr. Bohun), and saw the train move slowly off as they arrived!

"Lost it by only a minute!" she cried, throwing down the reins. Mr. Blackstone was dreadfully annoyed. "Dearest father, I really am very

sorry. I am born to be the plague of your life. What can we do?"

"When is the next train?"

"Not until two o'clock."

"Time enough for the house affair, but I may miss Mr. Bohun; he was coming down to-day—he will have started."

"Then he must be stopped," exclaimed Euphemia, springing out of the carriage, "you had better telegraph; or stay, I will do it for you, papa, and then you need not have the trouble of getting out."

She was gone in a moment, and when she returned, there was a smile of exceeding satisfaction on her countenance.

"What have you said?" asked her father.

"Just the words, 'wait until I come.' Was not that enough?"

"Quite right," said he, and she drove him back through all the lovely Bohun woods, rich in their summer splendour.

Mr. Blackstone was enchanted with everything he saw. The estate was much larger than he had had any idea of, and the manner in which the park and gardens were kept excited his warmest approbation, for he was a good judge of such matters, and looked on every bit of turf

or flower-border with the eye of a connoisseur, and as he looked, sad to say, even The Laurels fell "full fathom five" in his estimation.

"With all this, my dear child, what in the world can you want with a house in town?" was his natural exclamation.

"Damp work here in the winter and autumn, papa."

"I never found The Laurels damp," said he.

"No, you stand so very high and dry. Bohun Court lies in a hollow, papa; and besides, now that Sir Felix is so ailing, it will be duller than ever, and I should be moped to death."

And then an idea flitted through Mr. Blackstone's mind—quite a new idea to him, but one which had already occurred to Mr. Bohun, as he sat in the window of his club, ruminating over his conversation with the old man after he had parted from him.

It was, that very likely Sir Felix, feeling himself ill, and growing weaker every day, and seeing no prospect of Bohun Court descending to heirs in a direct line, had wished to purchase this house in town as a future and more congenial home for Lady Bohun in the event of anything happening to himself.

"This idea alters the case, alters my views

upon it, and removes many of my objections." thought Mr. Blackstone, as he seemed only to be gazing around him, but was inwardly pondering on his daughter's position. "It is, doubtless, the reason of the purchase, and a wise one, too, for what could a lone widow do with such an estate as this magnificent Bohun Court?"

And what, indeed, for the matter of that, could a lone widow do in such a house? and over such an establishment? and such a girl, too, as his "Phemy?" No; on second thoughts, that town-house plan was not so very unwise and extravagant, after all; and Mr. Blackstone inwardly resolved, should any opposition arise on the part of Mr. Bohun, to impart to him this new and luminous idea, secure that the effect would be immediate acquiescence.

CHAPTER IV.

“ A TELEGRAM for Mr. Bohun ! ”

Great excitement in the club, and the club servants running in and out of the rooms, and up and down stairs, to find Mr. Bohun, who sits quietly in one of the deep windows waiting for Mr. Blackstone, whom he expected in town by an early train.

Is there any one in the world who receives a telegram with perfect equanimity and indifference ? Is there a living soul, who, engaged in writing a letter, will calmly lay down a telegram, and not commence the perusal of it until he has finished his occupation ? No ; a telegram rarely fails to quicken the pulse of the recipient, and to excite the intense curiosity of all the bystanders, even though the former may have a Christmas dinner on the *tapis*, and guesses that the cabalistic signals

will merely have formed the words, "The turkey is on its way."

But the telegram in question both startled and alarmed Mr. Bohun, so much so that he felt half inclined to accept the offer of an officious friend, who, in the irresistible ardour of inquisitiveness, had said, "Shall I open it for you?"

"William Blackstone to Guy Bohun, Esq.

"Wait until I come."

Short and sweet. Provoking, disappointing, unsatisfactory. "Wait until I come!" And how long might that be? Was his journey to be postponed? his plans a second time entirely upset? every personal arrangement completely set aside, and he himself laconically commanded to "wait," by one who ought rather to have consulted *his* convenience than have issued the order so very cavalierly? But Mr. Bohun saw another hand in this telegram—it did not seem to him as if the spirit of poor, good, easy, unoffending Mr. Blackstone had moved it—it was some one less guileless, more designing.

"And she stops my journey for *this* day, at all events," said he to himself; and he had nothing to do for it but to wait, as he was bid, and postpone Bohun Court till the next morning.

People who saw him read his missive, lay it by,

and calmly resume his seat, exclaimed, "Now, isn't that like Bohun?—what an imperturbable fellow it is!" But the close of that day witnessed him in a very different mood; for once again the club servants were running about, and once again a great excitement prevailed, for there was a second telegraphic despatch for Mr. Bohun, and this time his agitation, as he read it, was unmis-takable.

His hands trembled—the colour rushed up into his forehead—he started from his chair, and, seizing his hat, hurried out of the club. On the stone steps, as he ran out, another gentleman was running in.

"Mr. Bohun, my dear sir! how can I apologise to you? But I assure you....."

"Mr. Blackstone, no apology is necessary, but I cannot be detained!" was the breathless answer. "Porter, call me a cab—there—stop that one!" and Mr. Bohun sprang into the first Hansom.

"But sir, dear sir!" cried the old lawyer, in pitiable distress, "the papers! the papers!"

"No papers on earth shall stop me now," were the words that burst from Mr. Bohun's angry lips, and the next moment he was out of sight. Mr. Blackstone stood watching the retreating cab

in mute bewilderment. A gentleman came up to him.

"I hope," said he, "that nothing has happened to Sir Felix Bohun?"

Mr. Blackstone was in that state that he was glad that any human voice should address him. He was full of questions and had nobody of whom to ask them, consequently, he hailed the courteous address eagerly.

"Nothing, nothing—not that I am aware of, and I left him three hours ago in his usual health; but as for Mr. Bohun, what on earth has come to Mr. Bohun I am at a loss to imagine. Can you tell me, sir, what has agitated him to this degree?"

"He has had a telegraph."

"Ah, yes, I know! but it could not be that, for I sent it myself, and there was nothing in it but four words on a little matter of business of very slight importance.

"Then he had a second telegraph."

"A second?—bless my soul!" It was now Mr. Blackstone's turn to tremble. "A second?—where? how? what?—how a second?"

No one could afford him any further information. The affair had been so momentary that all he could elicit was, that Mr. Bohun had crushed the letter in his hand and rushed out of the club.

"Then," said Mr. Blackstone, sitting down faintly in the porter's chair, "Sir Felix has died suddenly."

They brought a glass of water and loosened the old man's cravat, for he looked ready to drop, when suddenly the officious friend who had been so anxious to read Mr. Bohun's first telegram to him came flying down the stairs.

"I've found it!" he cried; "found it crumpled up under his chair; now we shall know....."

"No, no, no!" exclaimed Mr. Blackstone, extending his hand with sudden energy; "it is a private communication. Let me beg of you, sir, for honour's sake, to allow the contents to remain sacred."

"But I've read it already," was the reply, "and I can't make head or tail of it. Perhaps you, sir, knowing the members of the family, may be able to enlighten us."

Mr. Blackstone was in a painful position. Extreme anxiety to learn what had happened, and a very nice sense of honour, were antagonistic feelings warring within him. The finder of the letter, however, had no conscientious scruples. He read out the message in blissful ignorance of such sentiments—

"John Burley to Guy Bohun, Esq.—Please, sir,

come directly. Foul play with Hector; question of shooting him!"

A dead silence. Thus ran the telegraphic message, and neither could Mr. Blackstone make "head or tail" of it. Yet an expression of great relief came over his countenance.

"Thank heaven!" he ejaculated, whilst drawing a deep breath, "it can be nothing affecting my daughter. I thank you, gentlemen, for your kind attention. Lady Bohun is my daughter; and I beg to take my leave."

A dust-covered traveller, in the summer evening twilight, springs out of the railway train, and enters the first conveyance that presents itself. No need to tell the driver where to go; every one knows Mr. Bohun; and in half an hour he is at the gates of Bohun Court.

The evening is sultry—not a breath of air stirring—and he takes off his hat as he hurries up the avenue, for, even in his agony of haste, he thinks of his invalid brother, whom the unexpected wheels might startle, and, therefore, alighted at the lodge. He enters the hall, and his step rings as he crosses it, but before his own door is gained, the old butler meets him.

"Oh, sir! I humbly beg your pardon for

sending for you, since it was only to grieve you, but.....”

“No apology, Burley, you did perfectly right,” interrupted Mr. Bohun; “but tell me, in one word—what about Hector?”

The tone and the manner were both unlike Mr. Bohun. It seemed really (as he had once himself remarked) that since his brother’s marriage an evil spirit had been stirred up within him, and evil passions roused which might otherwise never have found birth. The Mr. Bohun, who now faced the shaking and trembling Burley, was a man on whose face sat a dark scowl, and in whose manner there was an imperious severity which completely metamorphosed him.

“What about Hector?” he repeated, before Burley had had time to answer.

“Oh, sir! he was sent down to the kennels last night.”

“By whose orders?”

“My lady’s, sir; and he howled, and fretted, and furied all night, and kept everybody awake, sir, besides setting all the other dogs off, and we heard it all; and this morning up comes William.....”

“Fool, fool that I was!” muttered Mr. Bohun; “I should have done it myself! Well?”

"Up comes William, sir, and says nobody dares go near him, for that he raved and foamed like mad, and my lady she catches at the word, as it were, and oh! sir.....I can't hardly tell you.....I know how you loved that 'ere dog, sir, and I made bold to tell my lady so.....but....."

"Go on," said Mr. Bohun, setting his teeth, "go on—they talked of shooting him, and you telegraphed to me?"

"Yes, sir; oh, yes!....."

Burley wrung his hands, and Mr. Bohun turned pale.

"They have not done it?" said he, in a slow, husky, concentrated sort of voice.

"I went down to the kennels, sir, and looked at him as he lay rolling, and I says, 'Hector!' and he looked up at me as bright-like, and sensible..."

Mr. Bohun waved his hand, whilst a contraction of pain crossed his face—"Go on," said he, "they have not *done* it?"

The old butler was silent; his eyes fell before the gaze fastened on him by Mr. Bohun, and it was the latter who answered his own question.

"They have shot him," said he, and Burley's continued silence betrayed the truth.

Not a word more passed between them, for, instantly turning, Mr. Bohun crossed the hall again,

entered the dining-room, which was vacant, and passing through it with rapid strides, had in another moment confronted his brother and Lady Bohun, both seated at the open window, overlooking the lawn and park.

"Guy!" cried Sir Felix, starting, as if he had seen a ghost; but Lady Bohun never uttered a syllable. Apparently thrown off her guard, she stared up in his face with terrified eyes and parted lips.

It was on her, not on Sir Felix, that he bent that flashing look of scornful indignation, as, in a voice which quickened even *her* pulse, he exclaimed, "By whose orders has my dog been shot?"

A pause—one of those guilty silences which speak volumes—but Mr. Bohun would not break it. He waited, now glancing from one to the other, but still waiting with a sort of savage determination, resolved neither to repeat his question nor to speak until it was answered, and he knew well with whom he had to deal. She should see his wrath in all its might, but his grief she should never guess! At last her eyes turned coward, and directed themselves towards her husband.

Lady Bohun was frightened for once in her life, and looked to the poor infirm invalid by her side to defend her. It was Sir Felix who spoke.

"Ah! my dear Guy, who has told you the sad news? We meant to break it to you by degrees!"

A smile, very faint, but still a smile, as if to say, "very well done," just curled Lady Bohun's lip, and she seemed to rally.

"I demand," continued Mr. Bohun, "by whose orders has my dog been shot?"

"My dear Guy," began Sir Felix, in a feeble, alarmed voice.....

"Let *me* speak, dearest Sir Felix," interrupted his wife, laying her hand on his arm: then, again raising her eyes to Mr. Bohun's face, but this time dauntlessly, she said, "*by mine*," with a slight bow, as though she would have added, had she dared, "now do your worst!"

"By yours?" Mr. Bohun met that presumptuous gaze very calmly. "By yours, Lady Bohun? and by what right did you presume.....yes," he repeated, as she started at the word, "by what right did you *presume*, even in this house, to give such an order?"

"By my right as mistress here, to order the death of any animal who was pronounced mad," retorted Lady Bohun.

"*Who* pronounced him mad?" was the next question.

"Every one," said she.

"Name one person," he persisted.

"I can name two," she exclaimed, passionately, "the stable-helper, William, and.....and.....Ponsford. They both said the dog was mad."

"I do not believe it," said Mr. Bohun; "and, Felix, I desire that the man who executed the order be immediately dismissed—have I your permission to do so?"

"Upon my word!" cried Lady Bohun, springing up, "am I to sit here, and be insulted in this manner, Sir Felix? Do you allow such conduct as this towards your wife?"

"Dearest Euphemia!" began Sir Felix, querulously, "be calm—Guy is right, he is justified—he knows best indeed—it is a very sad, unfortunate, hasty business, and has upset me completely! but I have no doubt Guy is right....."

"Right to insult me, by daring to question my word?"

Mr. Bohun curled his lip.

"Felix, I shall dismiss William. I believe he is the man who....."

"Who executed *my* order," cried Euphemia.

"Exactly," replied Mr. Bohun. "I thought none other would have ventured to execute an order, which, had Lady Bohun trusted to her own judgment, I hope would never have been issued."

"The dog was mad!" persisted her ladyship, with the rage of a child; and, bursting into a passion of tears, she rushed from the room.

Sir Felix clasped his hands despairingly, and Mr. Bohun quietly seated himself in the vacated chair by his side.

"Guy! Guy! I would have given my right hand rather than this should have happened. It was not my fault—I knew nothing of it. I certainly heard poor Hector very violent all night, because the wind set this way, and, poor fellow, he felt strange down at the kennels no doubt, and fretted himself wild; but, as to the order, it was William brought up the news that Hector was foaming at the mouth, and then Ponsford said he must be mad, and poor Euphemia was dreadfully alarmed; in fact, Guy, such a day as I have spent, I hope never to spend again! I only assure you, most solemnly, I had nothing to do with it!"

"Felix," said Mr. Bohun, "that man William must go."

"My dear Guy, I wish, oh! I wish he could! but Euphemia has raised him to be her own groom—she rides now—what can I do?"

"Do you, then, like him?"

"I detest him—he drinks," whispered Sir Felix, looking cautiously towards the door.

"He *shall* go," said Mr. Bohun; "give me your permission, and he *shall*."

"Will you take it upon yourself, Guy?"

"Most willingly. He shall not sleep another night beneath our stable roof. And now, my dear Felix, about business.....you know I must return to town....."

"No, no—oh! no," cried Sir Felix, vehemently, yet still in a whisper. "You must not leave me—you *must* not! You do not know all I go through—I want to tell you, but they give me no time. Oh! Guy, I beseech you not to desert me!"

Mr. Bohun was shocked at the look and manner of his brother whilst making this appeal; it was abject, imploring, and fearfully excited.

"My dear Felix, only for a few hours, merely to sign those papers about the money you wish to sell out for the purchase of the house in —— Square."

"The papers must come down here—all the lawyers in London may come if they like, too, but go you must not. Guy.....Guy.....is any one near?.....Guy.....I have something on my mind—on my conscience; I have done something I repent of; but I was worked upon—compulsion and intimidation have been at work. I have been induced to commit an act which is an injury to

you—the remembrance of it is killing me ; but, before I die, it shall be repaired—they will try hard not to give me time, but I will *make* time—only don't leave me, Guy ! in mercy, don't desert me !”

“ I will not.....but.....”

“ No buts. I know you have much to bear—so have I ; but bear it for my sake. It may not be for long, only don't desert me ! try and bear it a little longer ; promise me—it may be selfish—but, for my sake, promise.”

“ I do, then,” said Mr. Bohun, bitterly ; “ I promise—whatever betide.”

“ Never to leave me ?”

“ Yes.”

“ Till I die ?”

“ Yes, Felix—I promise.”

“ Swear it !”

“ I swear.”

Lady Bohun sat sobbing in her room, sobbing with rage and vexation. By her side stood Ponsford, unmoved. “ All your fault, Ponsford, for letting William come up to the house, gossiping ! If you had managed it all quietly, it would have been over before Burley knew anything about it, and that odious man would never have come down just at this unfortunate moment ! Sir Felix gave

in to him in an instant, when Mr. Bohun said William should be dismissed, and now, of course, he will go ! and there they are now, closeted together, brewing all sorts of mischief, I dare say, and such an object as I am, how can I go down ?—all your fault, Ponsford !”

“ No, my lady,” was the gentle answer, though her words were gall and wormwood ; “ *your* fault, not mine. If your ladyship had kept your temper and stood your ground, you would have mastered Mr. Bohun. As it is, whatever happens, you have no one to thank but yourself.”

Did Lady Bohun quietly bear this soft insolence ? did not the hot, impetuous blood boil up again ? No ; it was too late in the day for that ; Ponsford had made good *her* stand in Bohun Court, and lorded it over everybody with the comfortable assurance that whosoever else might be dismissed, there was no one who dared turn *her* out.

As for Lady Bohun, Ponsford looked upon her with the most supreme, though well-concealed, contempt, and exerted over her that marvellous influence which a strong mind invariably gains over a weak one ; the influence, also, of perfect temper and self-control over a violent disposition.

CHAPTER V.

A WEEK passed, and then Mrs. Blackstone arrived, accompanied by Mrs. and Miss Washington, and Captain Aylmer. Mr. Blackstone was detained in town on business and was not to join the party for some days, if at all, much to Euphemia's relief, for, to tell the truth, she was a little alarmed lest her keen-sighted father should discover that there was something amiss between herself and Mr. Bohun, and favour her with a second lecture.

From the day of the scene about Hector's death, she and her brother-in-law had not exchanged a syllable. He avoided her society as much as possible, and she evaded every opportunity of speaking to him, and now the inconvenience of such a state of affairs began to make itself felt.

Nothing would have been more bitterly annoying to Lady Bohun than for her dear friends, the

Washingtons, to find out that there was the slightest drawback to her brilliant position—nothing would have been so provoking to her as to see that Mrs. Washington doubted her perfect felicity. Yet so well acquainted was Euphemia with that lady's powers of penetration, that she felt very sure no skeleton could be in the cupboard of any house in which she was staying without her dragging it triumphantly forth from its hiding-place.

So this must be prevented—yes, at any cost—even that most humiliating of all, the “making it up” with Mr. Bohun; “eating humble pie,” to such a man as that! Yet it must be done, dear as the price was, for Ponsford said so.

“Mrs. Washington and Miss Maynard are both just the sort of people *to talk*,” Ponsford had said, “if you and Mr. Bohun are not upon terms, my lady.”

“But I hate him, Ponsford.”

“Yes, my lady; but people need not know that. There are plenty of ways of keeping him in awe of you, without giving others the satisfaction of seeing that there is a coolness.”

A coolness! oh, horrid word! *a coolness*. What an immeasurable depth of misery is contained, very often, in that small word when it creeps in, like a

destroying worm, gnawing, gnawing, gnawing at the core, eating the heart away, hollowing it out and leaving the surface fair and smiling for the world to look upon. And people go on for years and years, acting their part on the face of society well, all smiles outside, all hollow and bitter within—the old story of the apples of the desert over and over again. *A coolness* between them !

So there assembled in the drawing-room, that first day of the arrival of the guests, an apparently well-assorted party of twelve people: Sir Felix and Lady Bohun, Admiral and Miss Maynard, Mrs. Blackstone, and Mrs. and Miss Washington, Mr. Bohun, Captain Aylmer, Mr. Melville the clergyman, and two stray gentlemen of the neighbourhood.

Lady Bohun played her part for the first time. One would have thought Mr. Bohun had been the dearest friend she had in the world, and no one was astonished at her affectionate attention towards him, except himself. People were accustomed to see Mr. Bohun made much of; the Maynards and Mr. Melville had always thought more of him than of Sir Felix—(indeed, the latter, in Miss Maynard's eyes was a nonentity)—therefore, Lady Bohun's consideration attracted no attention in the quarters where he was known, but to the lynx-eyed

vision of Mrs. Washington, the lady's acting was not faultless—she rather overplayed the part.

"Fanny," said Mrs. Washington to her daughter, as she watched Euphemia flitting through the conservatory after dinner, cutting camellias, "I've found out something. Phemy's frightened out of her wits at that man. I never saw her so civil to anybody before!"

But it was Mr. Bohun who was the most astonished. Till now, he had set down many of Lady Bohun's faults to a mean, petty jealousy, a love of tyranny, and the tempers of a spoilt child, but in her present conduct he saw more than this—he saw deliberate deceit: he had begun by pitying, he had now learnt to despise. This feeling no doubt influenced his manner, for no sooner did the gentlemen come into the drawing-room after dinner, than Mrs. Washington signalled to Captain Aylmer to come and sit by her side that she might find out all she could. She wished to know what he thought of Mr. Bohun.

"I find he lives here entirely, so of course, for poor dear Phemy's sake, I am anxious to know what sort of a person he is."

"What sort of person do you *think*?" returned Captain Aylmer, with a diplomacy which would have done honour to a wiser head.

"A much more haughty, overbearing sort of character than I at first imagined," said Mrs. Washington, confidentially; "and I am sorry for it, because I look upon it as a sort of take-in. Phemy never anticipated it, I know, and it must be unpleasant for her to have the heir presumptive always on the watch by her side."

"Who says he *is* the heir presumptive?" exclaimed Captain Aylmer, quickly.

"Hush! not so loud—of course he is. Sir Felix would never dream of passing over his brother, unless for a son."

"I don't know. Phemy's a sharp one, you know, Mrs. Washington, and my idea is....."

"That she will have the life-interest?"

"Certainly, if not more."

"You don't say so!" ejaculated Mrs. Washington, biting her lips.

"No, I *don't*," retorted Captain Aylmer; "but it is *my idea*."

Mrs. Washington was not sure that his ideas were ever worth much, but this one was an annoying one. It would place Phemy on too proud an eminence a great deal.

"And," said the old lady, forgetting that she was speaking her thoughts aloud, "her husband does not look as if he would last very long."

"I don't think he will," replied her companion, quietly.

"But if it ends as you think," she continued, "perhaps Phemy does not mind keeping a skeleton in her cupboard. She certainly conceals it very well."

And this was all Euphemia gained for spending an evening of torturing humiliation. It was fortunate she did not hear another whispered conversation going on over a game of *ecarté*.

"Mr. Bohun, I don't like the looks of Sir Felix."

"You may well say that, Miss Maynard. I dislike them myself very much indeed."

"He looks very screwy."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Nonsense, Mr. Bohun; seedy then."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Mr. Bohun, if you will not allow me to talk in my own language, I will not talk to you at all."

"Oh! miserable man that I am. Then we must play our game in silence. Miss Maynard, do you permit me to propose?"

"You deserve to be refused; but tell me seriously, what ails Sir Felix? Father and I have a great affection for him after our fashion, and speaking now for myself, I honestly confess it

grieves me to see him. What is the matter, and has he had advice?"

Mr. Bohun laid down his cards. "He has had the advice of the first medical men in London, but he still goes on failing. Miss Maynard, my brother is seriously ill."

"I can see it, but what is it? He looks so strange—so nervous—so alarmed—as if spirits were whispering horrid things to him. How long has he been in this state?"

"Some time, I fear, but I have only known of it lately."

"What? did you not know till you went up to town?"

"No."

"I did, Mr. Bohun; I heard it from many of my London friends, but thought if you had wished it spoken of, you would have told us yourself."

"Miss Maynard, I was the only person *not* told," said Mr. Bohun, bitterly; and the moment the words had passed his lips, Miss Maynard laid down her cards, too.

"I thought so," she exclaimed; "I always told father so, and he used to say to me, 'Don't be putting things into people's imaginations, Jem;' but I always said, depend upon it, the vampire has not got into that house for nothing. I would stake my

existence that Ponsford is at the bottom of all this. Do you agree with me, Mr. Bohun?"

He shook his head and shrugged his shoulders. Miss Maynard continued—

"Did I not ask you, months and months ago, if the vampire had begun her deadly work yet? Upon my word, I believe she has, though I have only been a few hours in the house to judge. But I find a great change. She received me when I arrived, and conducted me to my room. Mrs. Dance always used to do that."

"I believe Dance has resigned," said Mr. Bohun; "but I ask no questions."

"I am glad, however, to see Burley still in his accustomed place. It does one good to hear his sonorous tones singing out, 'Dinner, Sir Felix!'"

At this moment there was a slight stir in the room. Till then Sir Felix had been in deep conversation with his old friend, Mr. Melville, her ladyship hovering continually round their chairs; but now he started, and a change came over his countenance. A tall, slight figure, with noiseless step, had approached and whispered in his ear; her dress, a sort of soft, steel-coloured, cloudy material, gave her a shadowy appearance, and, by general consent, there was a silence as she stood there, leaning over the invalid.

Mr. Bohun rose hastily and crossed the room. "Do you wish to retire so early, Felix?" said he.

"Yes, yes—I.....I think so," was the tremulous reply; "perhaps it is better for me. I may be more able to enjoy your society to-morrow if I leave you now."

Mrs. Washington touched Miss Maynard's arm. "That's Ponsford," she whispered; "that's the woman I would not have in my house if she asked me on her knees."

"Oh, *I* know her well!" was the reply.

"My dear friend," said Mr. Melville, as Sir Felix, on Ponsford's arm, prepared to leave the room, "I can come and have a little quiet chat with you when you are ready for me."

Ponsford gave Lady Bohun a glance.

"Mr. Melville," said Euphemia, hurriedly, "I am very sorry, but we had the most strict orders from our medical man that dear Sir Felix should not speak a syllable after retiring for the night. At ten he takes a composing draught. Forgive me for seeming so unfriendly, but indeed I must be very strict."

"Mr. Bohun," said Miss Maynard, in a low voice, "just look at the smile on Ponsford's face! For mercy's sake, beware of the vampire!"

The next morning, things had settled more into

their places. People began to look about and amuse themselves. The new reign was putting out the feeble light of the old one; and Euphemia, well tutored by an invisible agent in the art of hostess-hospitality, was indefatigable in her exertions to enlist every one of her guests in some species of amusement.

Insensibly, she gave Sir Felix less of her company. Insensibly, those nervous attentions, so watchful and so fidgetty, which she had lavished on him in town, relaxed, and she resigned the guard she had so long held into other hands. Something appeared to have taken a weight off her mind, and it seemed now her sole study to divert her guests and attract them away from the contemplation of affairs indoors, by a ceaseless round of gaieties out of doors.

Over Sir Felix, too, there came a great change. Mr. Bohun had thought this a good opportunity for running up to town again, and had once more sounded the ground with his brother. It was on this occasion that he saw the change. Instead of the usual distressing opposition, the answer he had received was, "Do—do, Guy—but come back soon; not that I want you to hurry for my sake, for I am happy now—quite, quite happy—only come back soon!"

CHAPTER VI.

AND Mr. Bohun went up to town, never having given his brother's remark more than the thought of a moment—treating it more as one of his usual exclamations, dreamy, mystical, and unconnected, as they now often were.

His departure acted like champagne on many of the visitors at Bohun Court. Euphemia led the revels now with a buoyancy hitherto unheard in those old walls, and fresh guests relieved each other every day. But in the library from morning till night, or out in his garden chair, sat Sir Felix Bohun, one attendant only by his side, one ever unwearied, reading to him, waiting on him, walking by his side, gathering flowers for him, never leaving him.

“And if I were Phemy,” cried Mrs. Washington, in the dull ear of Mamma Blackstone, “I would give up all this society rather than leave that poor

old man so completely in the hands, and the power, and at the mercy of that Mrs. Ponsford !”

There are some people who can never be pleased. Phemy was a great deal too prosperous to please her friends. They all secretly predicted a fall ; but Mrs. Blackstone had no such misgivings. She enjoyed seeing all the splendour around her. She thought Bohun Court a little dull and sombre, and too stately in its magnificence (particularly after her own faultless Laurels, so fresh, and so light, and always smelling so new) ; but still it was very satisfactory to see Phemy so well settled—she never used the term “happy,” it was always “well settled”—and she could not imagine what her dear friend, Mrs. Washington, saw to find fault with ; as for Ponsford, “I am sure she suits my daughter to perfection.”

“So she may ; but, my dear, anybody can see that she rules the whole house.”

“Very true,” replied Mrs. Blackstone, who grew more deaf every day, and took this remark for a compliment ; “so she does, just as if she had always been intended for a housekeeper ; but the fact is, the other is superannuated, and Ponsford just fills up the gap, so my daughter tells me.”

“I am glad it suits Phemy to think so,” said Mrs. Washington, with a sneer.

"She really does," returned happy Mrs. Blackstone, oblivious of half the sentence; "if she had hunted the whole world over, she could not have found any one to suit her better."

But Mrs. Washington was not the only individual who did not quite like the goings on at Bohun Court.

"Jem," shouted the Admiral one day to his daughter, "who may that young spark be whom my lady calls Sydney?"

"Oh, father, that is a cousin!"

"Humph! If I were Sir Felix I should have my wits a little more about me, eh?"

"I am disappointed in Lady Bohun, father," replied Miss Maynard, evasively; "she has fallen off in every way. As for Captain Aylmer he is merely a tame puppy."

"Waiting to step into the old man's shoes, eh?"

Miss Maynard was generally acute enough herself, but this idea had not occurred to her, and she felt both disgusted and indignant.

Her affection for Bohun Court and every one connected with it was great, so that when once put on the alert, she determined to make her own observations. She felt aggrieved, personally offended, on Sir Felix's account, and it gave her actual pain to see the Bohun name so degraded;

from that moment she could barely bring herself to be civil. One good thing was, Euphemia gave her female friends but little of her company. She devised all sorts of amusements for them, and she had three carriages of which they might take their choice ; but her own place was in her saddle from morning till night, and by her side, as a matter of course, was the only other equestrian of the party, Captain Aylmer. Behind them rode William, the groom—not yet dismissed !

So Miss Maynard waited and watched, and saw that her father's old eyes had been unusually sharp-sighted, and moreover that in Mr. Bohun's absence, her ladyship boldly flirted with her cousin in presence of Sir Felix, which till now she had not ventured to do.

People in a country neighbourhood are fond of finding a new topic of conversation. From high to low, the new subject was now Lady Bohun and her cousin. The gentry exclaimed loudly at all they gathered, and the villagers would come to their cottage doors, as the pair rode rapidly down the street, and cry with simple truth, " Dear heart ! my lady is better matched with that ' ere young gentleman than poor old Sir Felix !" .

" Poor old Sir Felix !" Oh ! if he could but have heard it ! he who, two years before, was a



gay, gallant man of a certain age, in admirable preservation, just going to be married for the third time !

But how did the report get about. Who was it who had whispered tales of "an old love, too poor to marry?"—that old, old story, which everybody seems able to claim and call their own—that episode which seems to form a part of so many and many a life ! Nobody could tell who had first propagated the scandal, but certain it was that it was rife in the neighbourhood, and, as is sometimes the case, those most nearly concerned were the last to hear it. Yet, singularly enough, it was now Lady Bohun herself who first became aware of the remarks that were being made, and it was Ponsford who informed her of them, the morning that Mr. Bohun was expected home again.

"If they come to Mr. Bohun's ears, my lady," said the confidential servant, with the impertinence over which Euphemia now found she had no control, "you will be sorry for it, for the two late Lady Bohuns were models of propriety."

"And who dares to say a word against *my* conduct?" cried Euphemia.

"It is the talk of the village, my lady ; and I considered it my duty to name it."

"Impertinent, insolent gossips!" muttered her ladyship. (She dared not say "insolent woman.")

"So they may be," returned Ponsford, in her provokingly cool, indifferent way; "but whether the gossiping be true or false, the effect is all the same, and I know very well, my lady, what Mr. Bohun can be, if he chooses. He will put up with a good deal, but not with anything of this kind. I say it for your ladyship's good, before he comes..."

"My good! What harm can he do *me*, I should like to know?"

"A great deal," was the calm reply.

Lady Bohun opened her eyes. Once or twice, lately, Ponsford had breathed mysterious hints, and Euphemia was unable to fathom them.

"What kind of harm?" she again asked.

"Mr. Bohun's influence over Sir Felix is undiminished, my lady."

"And what then?"

Had not Lady Bohun uttered these words with an air of imperious defiance, Ponsford's reply might have been more guarded. The defiance was not intended as personal, but general; but Ponsford took it as directed towards herself, and rebelled against it accordingly.

"Oh! my lady," said she, with a laugh most galling to the proud spirit of her mistress, "it is

not in human nature that Sir Felix would like to hear that a successor is ready, and waiting for Bohun Court (unless it were his own brother), and it is very certain that if Mr. Bohun ever dreamt of such a thing, he would take very good care of his own interests, and take active measures without a moment's loss of time."

"Other people can take care of their own interests, and take active measures, too, as well as Mr. Bohun," exclaimed Euphemia, colouring crimson with rage and humiliation, for she was not yet so completely subdued as not to feel what it was to be thus addressed without daring to retaliate; "so I am not much afraid of what *he* does! I flatter myself I have pretty well tied *his* hands. He shall have nothing but the title if *I* can help it!"

"As long as Sir Felix lives, and can use his hands and his thoughts, my lady," said Ponsford, stoutly, "you are not safe. I have lived in families where distant relations got everything into their power, to the utter ruin of those who had best right to the property. I know all about these things."

"But, Ponsford, the will is made!—safe, signed, sealed. I can defy Mr. Bohun."

"No, my lady, you cannot. There is such a thing as a codicil."

If a thunderbolt had fallen at Euphemia's feet, she could not have turned more deadly pale. She could not, for the moment, articulate a syllable, and to the pallor succeeded the deep flush that seemed only a few minutes before to have set all her features in a flame. Ponsford took no notice. She had said enough. She saw that her words had had their effect, and when her ladyship, after a long pause, said, "Dress me, quickly ; I wish to be downstairs some time before we assemble for dinner," she knew well that the alarm was given, and was taken.

The last pin was put in, the last bracelet clasped on.

"And now, Ponsford, go to Captain Aylmer's room, and tell him I shall be in the conservatory a quarter before seven, and he is to be there—or, stay, I will write."

"Better not, my lady. I can take the message much more safely."

Yes, trust her for that ; and so she did.

At the time appointed, the young man stood mischievously opening the folded buds of the clustering camellias in the conservatory, waiting for his cousin, who was herself not less punctual.

"Did you want me, Phemy?"

"Of course I did, or I should not have begged

you to be here. I want to tell you, Sydney, that foolish people are beginning to talk about us, and that I do not choose it. The consequence is, you must go."

"The deuce I must?"

"Yes; I choose it. Mr. Bohun returns to-night—perhaps, he has already arrived; and I have no idea of these idle idiots telling him their impertinent tales about you and me. In the first place, it is false and malicious, and, in the next, any report of the kind might do me the most serious and irretrievable injury. I cannot be more explicit. You must feel assured that my reasons are all-sufficient, otherwise I should never be so apparently inhospitable."

"But, Phemy, I have still ten days of my leave left; it will look so strange in the eyes of everybody my going in this hurry."

Euphemia had expected opposition; her vanity would have been wounded had she not met it; but the manner in which he offered it was not flattering; he made it appear as if his leaving Bohun Court were a personal inconvenience, besides "looking strange" in people's eyes—not breathing sighs of grief at leaving her, which she had rather expected. So she took him up sharply.

"What does it signify how it looks? What do

I care? I only intend that you should go. I am not going to have all my prospects injured because your leave happens to want ten days of its expiration. Not so, my good sir. I may dance with you five times running at a London ball and no one troubles their head, but it seems I am not to ride out by your side here, in the wilds of the Bohun woods, without rousing the virtuous indignation and shocking the immaculate propriety of the whole neighbourhood, so it shall just be put a stop to, and to-morrow morning, Mr. Sydney, off you go; so make your arrangements and your apologies without loss of time."

And away floated the airy figure to meet her guests just as they began to assemble for dinner.

Captain Aylmer looked after her.

"Injure her prospects—seriously and irretrievably—that's the game, is it? So! Lady Bohun! You are not, then, so very sure of your ground as you have given people to think. A skeleton in even *your* cupboard! But, luckily, you have let out the secret in very good time. I will not spoil your sport, fair cousin, though to leave your worthy husband's partridges on the eve of the slaughterous first of September will spoil mine, besides being enough to try any man's temper;

however, I will keep mine, if I can, and do your bidding cleverly."

Sir Felix always dined with his guests, but in the morning he was never seen. Accordingly, Captain Aylmer prepared to announce his dire intentions as soon as the dessert was put on the table.

"I am sorry to say, Sir Felix, this is the last time I shall have the pleasure of sitting with you at dinner. I regret to say, my leave has expired."

A glance at Euphemia, and a grunt from the Admiral to his daughter across the table.

"I was not aware your visit was to close so abruptly," said Sir Felix, stiffly.

"Why, no: but, you know, when one is under orders" (another glance) "one must obey, even though it's a bore. But I have had a very pleasant time of it, Sir Felix, thank you, and I like Bohun Court *hugely*."

"You do me honour," replied the Baronet, still more stiffly.

"Yes, I do really, though I often tell Phemy I could suggest such an improvement."

"I shall be glad to hear it," was the answer.

"I'll tell you," said the captain, coolly; "white-wash it!"

There was a faint scream at table, and it proceeded from Miss Maynard.

“Whitewash Bohun Court?” she cried; “you had better cut down the Bohun woods, too, then, whilst you are about it, and then the ancient mansion will stand out in as beautiful relief as any citizen’s box in merry England!”

“Well done, Jem!” muttered the Admiral.

“You are right, Miss Maynard,” returned the young man, twirling his moustaches, and nothing daunted; “there is a great deal too much timber about the house. It is that that makes you so rheumatic, Sir Felix.”

If anything had been wanted to make that young man more obnoxious than he already was to his host, it would have been these remarks. Sir Felix pushed his chair several inches back from the table, a sign he was unusually irritated; and Euphemia, her cheeks burning at her cousin’s daring revenge for her dismissal, hastily gave the signal to rise, and retired from table.

CHAPTER VII.

THE next morning saw Mr. Bohun back in his place again, quietly occupying his accustomed seat, and unostentatiously fulfilling his accustomed duties ; for he had still duties, although, one by one, almost all had been taken out of his hands.

But an event had occurred that morning which had very much disturbed the even tenor of his brother's life—an event so unexpected that, in spite of all Euphemia's efforts, a gloom and a damp had been spread over the house and household. Mrs. Trant had been found dead in her bed—calmly sleeping the sleep of exhausted nature—and Sir Felix, though carefully prepared before being informed of the circumstance, was exceedingly pained and shocked.

Mr. Bohun found himself appointed her executor, and all his days were now spent down at her cottage, arranging the old lady's affairs. The

cottage fell back into the Bohun estate ; but being quite separate from it, Mr. Bohun took the opportunity, after the funeral, of making his brother an offer on the subject, and this was no more or less than to purchase it for himself.

It was so situated on the outskirts of the Bohun woods, the high road dividing it from the main estate, that it seemed exactly the place to suit him, being a little bit of his own home without being attached to it—an excrescence, in fact, which might be severed without interfering in the least with the estate, and yet which still bore the beloved name of Bohun, with the humble addition of “Lodge” appended thereto.

“So, Felix, if you please,” said he, as soon as he had succeeded in dismissing Ponsford, by calmly telling her she might go, “I will buy it of you, and make it the most perfect bachelor’s box that ever it fell to a happy bachelor’s lot to possess.”

Sir Felix had been listening to his brother for some time, with a sort of pleased, but nervous, attention ; but now that the harangue closed with these words, he looked round the room with violent trepidation and restless eyes.

“Is she gone?” said he, in a whisper.

“Certainly she is,” replied Mr. Bohun.

"See, see!" continued Sir Felix; "see, and be quick—is she gone?"

Mr. Bohun walked to the door with his usual bold, heavy step, and opened the door wide. He could see to the end of the passage, and there there was a swing door of red baize; it swung as he opened the library door in which they were sitting; Ponsford had been waiting—*listening*—in that passage, and Mr. Bohun's blood boiled, but he said nothing to his brother—why vex him needlessly? Why make him feel still more than he certainly already felt, that he was the victim of that worst of all species of tyranny, the tyranny of a servant? But she had evidently heard every word of their discourse.

"Is she gone?" repeated the invalid, with an anxious, inquiring gaze.

"There is no one there," said Mr. Bohun.

"Then now I will tell you!" cried Sir Felix, brightening up, and clasping his brother's hands with vehemence; "my dear, good, faithful Guy, I will tell you all—tell you what no one in the wide world knows but Melville and Wheeler," (this was his medical attendant). "You need not buy the Lodge; you shall have it. It is your's during my life by courtesy; it will be your's after my death by right. God bless you, Guy, for all you have

been to me ! and God forgive me, for ever having, in a moment of intimidation—yes, so help me Heaven !” he exclaimed wildly, “a moment of *intimidation*, executed a deed to wrong and injure you most bitterly ! But thank God, thank God, for life and opportunity—I have lived to cancel that wicked document ! Look here !” and opening his dressing-gown, a garment of richest brocade, lined with quilted silk, he showed his brother a little slit frayed away in the lining, in which he had concealed what appeared to be half a sheet of paper. “Look here ! see what a hiding-place ! A codicil, Guy ! Nothing injurious to my wife—no, she has her due ! She will have the house in town, and seven thousand a year—ample, ample ! and you, the baronet, will, of course, have all the rest. It is as it should be, thank God ! Oh ! how thankful and happy I am, no words can say ! And, scrap as it is, it is properly signed, sealed, attested ; no fear, dear Guy ; all is right, and now I shall die in peace. But do not you forget where to look,” he added, carefully reclosing the dressing-gown ; “no one can suspect, because it is far down in the lining—don’t you forget—but I am so happy ! Oh, Guy, if this were my last hour !.....”

“Sir Felix,” said a voice of icy coldness, “this

agitation is most unwise, most injurious—you must immediately take your draught, and I feel sure Mr. Bohun will pardon my begging you to try and sleep, since Mr. Wheeler's express orders were that you should be kept perfectly quiet."

Could she have heard? Even Mr. Bohun, temperate and calm as was his nature, now trembled with emotion. Could she have heard? could she have seen? If so, ought he to leave the room? ought so important a paper to be left in such a hiding-place, on such a risk?

No! ten thousand times, no! And Mr. Bohun took the glass, with the composing draught in it, deliberately out of Ponsford's hands, and administered it to his brother himself.

Did he look up as he did so? No, he could not; *there* his heart and courage failed him; he could not meet the dreadful, fearful expression which he knew would be sitting like an evil spirit on the vampire's face; but he gave the draught, and drawing a chair close to his brother's side, he placed his hand on his arm with the words, "Now do not speak another syllable. Everything is arranged as we could wish. Sleep!"

Mr. Bohun sat by his brother. Ponsford took her work, and seated herself in the window. She was evidently bent on standing her ground; so was

Mr. Bohun ; he left it to destiny to decide which would have to give way.

“If she leaves me alone with him, that paper shall be secured ; if I am compelled to leave her here, all is lost. Now, Guy Bohun, your fate hangs on a chance !”

And half hour after half hour chimed on every clock within hearing, and still Sir Felix slept.

That day Mr. and Mrs. Blackstone, the last of the guests, were to leave Bohun Court, and Euphemia was fully occupied in assisting their departure, and driving them to the station. She had not been in to see her husband since the morning, and was not expected home till late, having arranged to take luncheon at some neighbouring house. Thus, had it not been for the irritating presence of Ponsford, Mr. Bohun would have had his brother entirely to himself.

“Is she a creature of air ?” thought he, as he heard the servants’ dinner-bell ring and she showed no signs of moving ; “will she sit there for ever ?”

But now a loud ring at the hall door, and a visitor’s steps resounded over the wide expanse of the entrance. Ponsford looked up mildly.

“Her ladyship desired me to give a general order of not at home,” said she, demurely ; but, before Mr. Bohun had time to utter the reproof at

her presumption which rose hastily to his lips, the door opened softly, and Mr. Wheeler, the doctor, came in.

With a silent bow, he took the seat vacated by Mr. Bohun at the side of the sleeping man, and fixed his eyes on his face.

"Has he been long asleep?"

"Unusually long," said Mr. Bohun.

"Two hours," said Ponsford.

"Did he take his draught?"

"Mr. Bohun gave it to Sir Felix, sir," (in a slightly aggrieved tone).

"Ha!"

Very gently, as doctors touch the pulse of a slumberer, Mr. Wheeler laid his hand on the now attenuated wrist of Sir Felix.

Mr. Bohun glanced inquiringly at him.

"Irregular," was the answer to the unspoken question; "very fitful, but Sir Felix has had a severe shock in the death of our good old friend, Mrs. Trant."

"Possibly, then," said Mr. Bohun, "the composing draught has had greater effect in consequence of his exhaustion, for he has been but feeble all to-day."

"Very possibly," said Mr. Wheeler, and he continued sitting by his patient's side.

There are few of us who do not know what it is to watch by the chair or the bed of a sleeper whose lamp of life is burning low. We sit still, and silent, and count the breathings, and watch the eyelids, and wait ready to reply, under our breath, to the first half-coherent words of returning consciousness, and we go on waiting and waiting till the minutes stretch out into hours, and still.....how he sleeps on !

So sat those three persons. The doctor, like all doctors, kept his own counsel well, but Mr. Bohun saw in his countenance some unusual misgiving, and watched him nervously.

Ponsford also watched, but on her features were no traces of nerves ; not a muscle of that alabaster visage knew what it was to quiver, tremble, or even to relax, but she watched the trio steadily.

"I tell you what," said Mr. Wheeler, at last, as if trying to speak easily and cheerfully, and addressing himself to Ponsford ; "it is growing late, and Sir Felix is a little worn out. I should get him into bed as soon as possible if I were you."

"At the risk of awaking him ?" asked Mr. Bohun.

"This is not like natural sleep," was the reply, 'it is exhaustion : he will hardly wake—at all events, I will wait and see."

"I will call Burley," said Mr. Bohun, moving to the bell.

"There is no necessity, sir," exclaimed Ponsford, hastily; "Sir Felix never requires Mr. Burley when he is in these sleeps. Mr. Wheeler will excuse me, but by merely drawing out his chair and lowering the back, it forms a bed on which he may perhaps rest till midnight. This is very frequently the case. I never disturb Sir Felix."

Mr. Wheeler bowed grimly, and walked towards the door. Mr. Bohun stood and watched Ponsford—watched her with a curious thrill at his heart—watched her stealthy movements, her quiet touch, her graceful hands—watched her lower the sleeping form, raise the resistless limbs, fold the drooping arms;—watched her jealously, breathlessly, as if his fate hung upon a thread (and so it did!).

And now all was done, and she turned towards him with that meekly defiant air so peculiarly her own. It said as plainly as words, "For what are you waiting?"

Mr. Bohun's course was taken in a moment, for just then the hall bell resounded again, and he thought it was Lady Bohun returning. Should it prove so, his chance of securing that document was over, for it was difficult enough to elude the vigilance of Ponsford—to elude that of both was impossible.

"Mr. Wheeler," said he, "may I trouble you to *remain here* whilst I go and speak to Lady Bohun? I am extremely uneasy about my brother, there is something in his appearance very alarming, and I feel that Lady Bohun should be prepared."

"You are quite right," replied Mr. Wheeler. and he resumed his place.

But the ring at the bell was not her ladyship. It was Mr. Melville, calling to inquire after his old friend, the very person Mr. Bohun most wished to see.

This was no moment for form and ceremony, there was no time for courteous greetings; he must dash into his subject at once.

"Mr. Melville, one word before you enter his room; are you aware—but of course you are—of the existence of that small codicil of my brother's?"

Mr. Bohun's voice shook—his whole manner was unlike himself—agitated and unsteady.

"Of course, my dear friend, surely I am: what of it?"

"Are you aware of its singular hiding-place?"

"Yes, and have remonstrated repeatedly, only Sir Felix assures me he changes it every day."

"But he has this evening exhorted me to remember where it now is, as though he meant this

to be its final place of concealment. It is now in the lining of his dressing-gown."

"Then we must take possession of it at once."

"That woman's presence, my dear friend, has prevented and interrupted me this whole day."

"But it shall not prevent *me*," exclaimed the old clergyman; "come and let us see to it at once."

These few sentences took but few minutes to utter, but before Mr. Bohun and his guest could reach the library, Ponsford emerged from it in great haste.

Her face was deadly pale.

"Is her ladyship here?" she asked, hurriedly.

"No; what is the matter?" was the equally hurried rejoinder.

"Sir Felix has roused up, but he has fainted, sir; we want some brandy, it is on the sideboard in the dining-room. Would you go to him, if you please, Mr. Bohun, whilst I get the brandy?"

But Mr. Bohun, close to the dining-room door, rushed in there and left Ponsford standing in the hall. He then returned and entered the library with Mr. Melville. By this time Sir Felix was in his bed. Mr. Wheeler had taken him up in his arms and lifted him in like a child. Ponsford stood quite in the background, still white as a

sheet, and gazing on the recumbent, fainting figure of her master, with something very like terror in her eyes. At this moment Lady Bohun herself entered, and looking wildly round, paused at the door, her trembling lips seemingly afraid of asking what had happened, or what was going on.

It was Mr. Wheeler who spoke. "He is all right, now, Lady Bohun. Do not alarm yourself. Sir Felix is coming round, nicely, and will be quite himself in a few minutes. By the time your ladyship has taken off your bonnet, he will be ready to speak to you."

Euphemia turned away, and leant against the door with her hands over her eyes.

"Take Lady Bohun out of the room," whispered he to Ponsford; "I will take care of Sir Felix, but she must not see him in this state."

"Is he going?" whispered Mr. Bohun, hoarsely.

"No; the appearance is worse than the reality; his pulse is returning, stronger and stronger; he will rally, only it is distressing to witness, and no one can be of any use; in fact, I think I had better remain, and both you and Mr. Melville trust him to me alone. When the fit is over, I will let you know. The butler may come, but not.....*not that woman*, if you please."

"Does Wheeler know where that paper is?"

asked Mr. Melville, as he and Mr. Bohun left the room together.

“I think not,” was the answer; “I wished to have told him, but could find no opportunity.”

“Then we are lost!” exclaimed Mr. Melville.

CHAPTER VIII.

AND so it was. The opportunity had gone by.

That evening, Mr. Melville and Mr. Wheeler both dined at Bohun Court. It was the first time for many and many a week that so small, so silent, and so stiff a party had sat round that once festive table. Had not those two friends been constrained by circumstances to accept the message of invitation sent down by Lady Bohun, she and Mr. Bohun would have enjoyed a *tête-à-tête*. As it was, when the bell rung for dinner, they were told her ladyship was already in the dining-room, and when they joined her, there was a sort of awe over the whole party which rendered conversation impossible.

Mr. Bohun glanced once only at her face. It was without a tinge of her usual bright colour, and her long black eyelashes lay like a shadow on her cheek. She never once looked up, and as, after

dinner, she noiselessly slid out of the room, he could hardly help asking himself, "*Does* she feel, or is this all assumed?"

All that night Sir Felix lay in a sort of stupor. The next morning he rallied completely, and his first question was for his brother.

"Where is Mr. Bohun? I wish to speak to him.....and alone; call him."

It was Ponsford who received the order, but Burley who executed it, for, in spite of the anxiety with which Sir Felix uttered the words, she heard them unmoved, and displayed no intention of either obeying or leaving the room, until, on Mr. Bohun's arrival, Sir Felix repeated his desire to be alone. Then, indeed, she went, her step more hasty than usual, and, to the dying man, even this slight circumstance and its cause was very apparent—he understood her now so well.

"She leaves me, Guy, because I order her to do so. I am too far gone now to care for the power which she once exercised over me; but she only leaves me that she may bring Lady Bohun, knowing that to turn *her* out of the room would be impossible; but, till she comes, I can speak to you. It is of that paper.....you know.....well, I want you to know, that last night, about dinner time, just as you left me, and she thought me sleeping,

I felt her hand creeping cautiously to my hiding-place, searching for it, Guy—as surely as I live, searching for it! The agony of the thought was so great, that, in my terror to secure it from her, I started up, and the exertion overcame me—I fainted.”

“And the paper, Felix?”

“Is safe, for, fortunately, she was alarmed; when I roused up, it was still safe, thank Heaven, and since then she has had no opportunity to torment me further, for Wheeler has never left me; but now, Guy, till my last breath is drawn, I want you to watch her—to watch those insidious movements, those stealthy hands, those marvellous eyes which, though so seldom raised, see everything. Watch her, lest she discover my new hiding-place.”

“Then, Felix, you have concealed it elsewhere?”

“Yes—yes! in the dead of the night I felt a sudden strength.”

“But this is unwise, my dear brother. Tell me where it is, and let me give it either to Wheeler or Mr. Melville.”

“Good—good—so I will! and I only wish the idea had occurred to me before; however, it is not too late; here, take these keys, Guy.”

Sir Felix turned in his bed, and from between

the mattresses drew out a bunch of three keys. He was in the act of offering them to Mr. Bohun, when Euphemia stood suddenly at his side, and he fell back on his pillow.

"What keys are those?" said she, in a voice of calm, icy displeasure.

"Keys," replied Mr. Bohun, without a moment's hesitation, and taking them out of his brother's hand with a grasp of iron, "keys which my brother entrusts to my care. Is it not so, Felix?"

Sir Felix made a gesture in the affirmative; but he was mute—trembling from head to foot. Behind Lady Bohun stood Ponsford.

"My lady," said she, "these interviews are killing Sir Felix. You really should exert your authority, otherwise I shall be answerable to Mr. Wheeler for the consequences."

It was not a moment to create a disturbance; it was not a scene in which to stand on one's dignity; otherwise, Mr. Bohun felt strongly tempted at that crisis to utter one of his crushing remarks, and silence the insolent menial on the spot, but a glance at his brother deterred him. The pallid hue, succeeded by a livid look about his mouth, bore quite an appearance of approaching death, and for words of anger and bitterness to be exchanged in the presence of one whose ears would soon be

deaf to all mortal sounds, seemed to Mr. Bohun so fearfully irreverent, that he closed his lips firmly, determined no reproof should escape them.

From that time Sir Felix slept, if sleep it could be called. In an arm-chair by his side sat his brother, watching every breath; on a sofa, at the end of the room, Lady Bohun, sleeping soundly the whole night; in the adjoining room, at a table, reading steadily and apparently immovably, Mrs. Ponsford. Mr. Bohun watched her from his dark corner, and could discern not the slightest trace of fatigue or drowsiness on her countenance, although, to his certain knowledge, she had sat up with the invalid for the last five nights, nor had he missed her at her post by day.

"The woman must bear a charmed life," thought he, and as he thought, a feeling of sleep irresistibly stole over him; heavier and heavier grew his eyelids—heavier and heavier his head.

He was aroused by the voice of the doctor.

"Mr. Bohun, you must go to your room, and take some rest. You will be completely knocked up. I have sent off both Lady Bohun and her maid, and will take your place."

Mr. Bohun started up.

"You do not mean," he exclaimed, "that you

found me asleep? And I was so determined to keep awake!"

"You were sound, for I came in an hour ago, and did not rouse you. As for Sir Felix, his sleep actually seems more natural, and his pulse has rallied—he is awaking."

The gray light of very early morning streamed through the shutters on the ghastly face of the sleeper, who was now beginning to move uneasily, muttering incoherently, and the doctor raised him up.

"The paper—the paper!" he gasped.

Mr. Bohun held up the keys.

"No, no, no!" cried Sir Felix, vehemently, "they have nothing to do with it! *They* only belong to the proof-boxes, full of bonds and deeds. No, no, no!—but the paper—the paper, Guy—I hid it! where did I hide it?—oh! Heaven help me, for I have forgotten! where *did* I hide it? Did I not tell you? did I not tell Wheeler? No! I never told Ponsford, that I swear! Oh! Guy, Guy, where *did* I hide that paper?"

An agony, dreadful to witness, was convulsing every feature.

"Be calm," said Mr. Bohun, "it cannot be far off; I shall find it, depend upon it; be calm, and

remember only that I know of its existence, and shall find it."

"What a pity," whispered the doctor to Mr. Bohun, "that you did not possess yourself of it! It was of too great importance to be thus hazarded."

So thought Mr. Bohun, but, in the present state of his brother, it was impossible to say so. Sir Felix raved and tore at everything within his reach, shook his books to see if he had put it between the leaves, and insisted on every article in the room being moved, "before," as he hoarsely whispered, "that woman comes back to hunt and find it, for find it she surely will!"

In vain Mr. Bohun assured him that he should not be left—that every corner of the apartment and every atom of the furniture should be searched till the missing paper were found; in vain Mr. Wheeler implored him to be calm, and to give himself time to think where he had concealed it; Sir Felix was now beyond control; it was the fearful wrestle of life with death, and death seemed every instant about to gain the mastery, till all of a sudden Sir Felix sank back exhausted, one word only escaping in a hissing sound between his clenched teeth, the word "Search," and again and again, at intervals, this word was breathed, till the voice grew lower and lower.

"He sleeps again," said Mr. Wheeler, fixing his keen and experienced eye upon him; "he sleeps the sleep of unconsciousness. Now, Mr. Bohun, that paper must be found. You have never left the room since Sir Felix told you he had concealed it?"

"My brother told me that *you* had never left him since, and I believe I succeeded you so immediately that I do not think he was alone more than five minutes."

"How do you mean alone? alone with whom?"

"He was never alone with any one, for, now I remember, Burley sat up last night. He certainly came to call me just as you went away this morning, but that could hardly be called leaving him, for I met him at the door."

"Burley, of course, is not.....I mean is one in whom you have entire confidence?"

"As much as in my own soul!" said Mr. Bohun, emphatically.

"Then can you at all account for the singular disappearance of this paper?"

"Certainly. My brother, with the eccentricity that has marked his habits of late, hid it; and, weakened in mind by his state of health, has simply forgotten where. But we shall find it."

Mr. Wheeler looked uneasy.

"I do not like it," said he; "I feel very uncomfortable about it. I know a great deal more as to its contents than you do, my dear sir, and I feel extremely uncomfortable. Until that paper is found, no one should be permitted to leave the house. I beseech you to see that this order is given."

Mr. Bohun smiled, but walked to the bell nevertheless.

"I will tell Burley, since you wish it so much," he observed; "but really I think it is rather an unnecessary precaution. No one feels inclined to go out at this moment, depend upon it."

"Except....." said Mr. Wheeler, pointing to the window as a shadow passed; "except that person, to whom meat and drink, and sleep, seem superfluities. Now where has that woman been?"

"Not far," returned Mr. Bohun, advancing to the window, and watching Ponsford as she paced backwards and forwards; "not far, for she has no bonnet on, you see."

"Humph," said Mr. Wheeler, and at this moment Burley entered.

"Burley," said Mr. Bohun, "it is my wish, for reasons which you will know hereafter, that no one should quit the house this morning without my knowledge. Can you see to this?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Has any one been out already?"

"No one beyond the lawn, sir. It is hardly seven o'clock now."

"I saw Ponsford pass the window just now."

"Did you, sir?" Burley seemed surprised.

"She must have got out of one of the windows then, for she never went through the hall. I shall inquire about that, sir."

"You need not," said Mr. Bohun; "for she is without her bonnet, and perhaps wants a breath of fresh air, so say nothing about it, only remember what I said."

Burley turned to go. In passing the bed on which Sir Felix lay, he uttered a loud exclamation and staggered back. In an instant, both the doctor and Mr. Bohun rushed forward, and hastily drew back the curtain. The bright rays of the morning sun now streamed fully in, but they only lighted up the pallid face of death, for the living spirit had passed from its earthly tenement, and the troubled heart of Sir Felix Bohun beat no longer.

And then came those dreadful words, customary, but how chilling and mysterious! those words which sum up everything—few and forcible—the words, "He is gone."

CHAPTER IX.

SILENCE throughout Bohun Court; voices all hushed, and footsteps treading as noiselessly as possible, everything telling of death within the house.

Yet the stately rooms were far from empty. Sir Felix had only lain dead two days, yet the gravel in front of the hall door was cut up by wheels, and almost every room was full. Mr. and Mrs. Blackstone had arrived. Messrs. Bland and Frumpton had arrived. Messrs. Deedes and Grim had arrived. It was in the hands of these latter gentlemen that the last will and testament of Sir Felix was supposed to be, but Messrs. Bland and Frumpton had attended to deliver up some boxes bearing the late Baronet's name, which he had not withdrawn from their care, and having received from Mr. Blackstone an invitation to remain and hear the will read, their anxiety made their acceptance a very ready one.

Yes, every one was anxious now. Anxiety was the predominant feeling in the house, and it sat on every face, save that of the newly-made widow. Her conduct and countenance were equally extraordinary. In the first place, she announced her intention of being present whilst the will was read ; in the next, there was an unmoved, tearless composure about her which surprised every soul around her, even her own mother.

“ But,” as Mrs. Blackstone whispered to Mr. Deedes, “ my daughter has such wonderful self-control. She never gives way.”

“ A most laudable character,” was the old lawyer’s reply, and Mrs. Blackstone, thinking he said “ a most horrible character,” turned crimson, and was on the verge of asking an explanation, when her husband set her right, and begged her to go and support Phemy who had just entered the room—not alone—but followed by Ponsford with a smelling-bottle and a reticule.

Lady Bohun took her seat calmly—she did not look as if she required any support ; and no sooner had she settled herself in her chair, than Messrs. Deedes and Grim opened their papers.

It was a curious sight to see the group round the table at that moment, a group consisting of persons all likely to be most deeply interested in

the document about to be read. Lady Bohun sat at the head ; on one side of her, her father ; on the other, Mr. Deedes. Then came Messrs. Grim, Bland, and Frumpton ; then Mrs. Blackstone between Messrs. Melville and Wheeler, and lastly, at the end of the table, Sir Guy Bohun.

Behind him stood several of the old servants, present by the express wish of Lady Bohun. As she seated herself, she had looked round with perfect self-possession, though every vestige of colour had left her face ; even her lips were white, but her voice clear and firm, as she exclaimed : “ I am glad to see all present to whom the contents of this will are of consequence. No one can suppose that I am ignorant of the manner in which my husband has disposed of his property, but still it is satisfactory to me to be surrounded by many who will bear me witness that every line of this document was his own free act.”

The only person who ventured to look unfeigned surprise at this speech was Sir Guy Bohun. To him, it sounded strangely like “ *Qui s’excuse, s’accuse,*” but he said nothing. He sat still and listened, and then came the astounding revelations.

“ To his beloved brother Guy, a legacy of ten thousand pounds.”

"To his faithful and devoted servant, Mira Ponsford, a legacy of two thousand pounds."

Everybody absolutely started, save the object herself, and her attitude was that of a marble statue.

Then came numerous minor bequests, and, lastly, the summing up.

"To his beloved wife, everything he possessed on earth—money, house, and lands—not only for her life, but her's, entirely, absolutely, and for ever !"

A dead pause. The muscles round the corners of Euphemia's mouth trembled, quivered, and defied control. The pause became positively painful, and it was Mr. Deedes who broke it, by saying, in a hurried way, "I think that is all."

Then another pause, and Mr. Blackstone—her own father—spoke up.

"Gentlemen," said he, his voice full of emotion and agitation, "I confess this arrangement—this will—has taken me quite by surprise. I am so overcome by it, that I do not know how to express myself, particularly feeling most deeply and acutely as I do, and as every one *must* feel, that we all sit in the presence of one who has an unquestionable right to consider himself most bitterly aggrieved, and.....and....."

The old man could get no further, but suddenly

burst into tears. A movement and a murmur went round the table. Euphemia alone sat perfectly calm and collected, for she had now recovered herself; but Ponsford was bending over her with the smelling-bottle.

Before any one could reply to this address, three of the persons present had risen from their chairs, Mr. Wheeler, Mr. Melville, and Sir Guy Bohun, but it was the former who got in the first word, and he addressed himself to Mr. Blackstone.

"Your emotion, sir, and your words, both do you honour, and your feelings are, I suspect, shared by *almost* all here present; still I have something to say which, with all due deference to Lady Bohun, and respect to *her* feelings, will, I trust, relieve you of much of the distress which your sense of right and wrong has entailed on you. I beg to state that there exists"—and here his words were slow and emphatic, and his eyes turned towards Lady Bohun—"there exists a codicil to this will!"

"Not to *our* knowledge!" burst in Mr. Deedes, with a flush like a dash of crimson blood upon his forehead.

"To *my certain* knowledge!" continued Mr. Wheeler, in the same measured tone; "and a codicil of much more recent date than that will."

"After-thoughts — unsigned — informal — all waste paper!" panted Deedes and Grim, in turn.

"After-thoughts—*better* thoughts—legally witnessed!" retorted Mr. Wheeler, angrily; "signed, sealed, witnessed! call it what you please. But there exists that codicil, a just and proper codicil, and one which will, in one moment, throw over that most nefa....."

"Wheeler, Wheeler!" exclaimed Sir Guy, seizing him by the arm, "be silent, I implore you—let me speak now."

"I am glad of it!" cried Mr. Blackstone, drying his still streaming eyes. "Yes, Phemy, I am very glad of it, dear child; for, as that good gentleman says, this does seem even to me, your own doating old father, a most nefarious....."

"Papa!" exclaimed Lady Bohun, imperiously and imperatively, "I must entreat you to command any expression of your sentiments for the present. Mr. Wheeler says there is a codicil of later date than this will—who else says so?" and she looked haughtily round the table.

"I say so. I witnessed it," said Mr. Melville.

"And you?" continued Lady Bohun, her eyes resting on Sir Guy.

"I am aware of its existence," he replied, in tones as frigid as ice.

"Then," said she, lowering her large white eyelids with the most cutting scornfulness, "produce it!"

Sir Guy cleared his voice. "I am sorry," said he, "to be placed in so painful and perplexing a position, and I must beg my friend, Mr. Melville, to enter into a full explanation of all the circumstances of this most extraordinary case, for he really knows more about it than I do, since I believe the document in question was executed during my absence from Bohun Court."

"Produce it!" repeated Lady Bohun.

"We shall hope to do so," said Mr. Melville, taking up the subject now himself, and irritated by her manner; and forthwith he detailed minutely every circumstance connected with the execution of the codicil.

"It was a spontaneous resolution, to which, it appears, my late good friend, Sir Felix, had come, after mature thought and deliberation....."

"Not very mature," interrupted Mr. Deedes, "since *our* will only dates three months back."

Mr. Melville proceeded without heeding the impertinence of the remark.

"I had observed repeatedly that something was on his mind, but did not presume to beg his confidence till it was given to me, and this was done

unreservedly about a month ago. He gave me the paper to read, and Mr. Wheeler and I, at his earnest request, saw that it was made a valid document. Strange as my story may seem, that document was secreted about either his person or his bed furniture up to within a few hours of his death."

"Then," again repeated Lady Bohun, whose countenance was ashy pale from rage, and whose teeth seemed clenched together, "as I said before, *produce it!*"

"I hope I may be able," replied Mr. Melville, nothing daunted; "but now comes the most singular part of my recital. Sir Felix, from motives which are known to others better than to myself, thought fit to conceal most carefully—day by day, and hour by hour changing its hiding-place—this important paper. Both Sir Guy Bohun and Mr. Wheeler will bear me out in this assertion."

"One moment," interposed Mr. Deedes; "may I request to know if, in this as yet unfound codicil, Bohun Court, failing male heirs, would become the property of Sir Guy?"

"It was so arranged, and most justly, as I believe all present will allow, considering the large jointure—the immense jointure—left to Lady Bohun," said Mr. Melville.

"I agree," exclaimed Mr. Blackstone, "I agree, sir! Although it is my own daughter, this will is most....."

"Papa!" said a voice, concentrated and low.

"Yes, my child, alas! I agree. And as for a legacy of two thousand pounds to one whose services have been of such short duration, although I do not for a moment wish to detract from her merits—my dear, I *will* be heard!—I repeat that the sum of two thousand pounds to her, from the estate, is monstrous and preposterous! *There!*"

He sat down overpowered.

"Well," said Lady Bohun, "all this is extremely pleasant for me, but I shall not retire. I feel in my proper place, and I shall bear whatever is imposed upon me. Now, gentlemen, if you please, prove the existence of this codicil, by which Sir Guy Bohun becomes possessed of the home that has been left to me, and then I shall withdraw my claims, but not before!"

Sir Guy rose. "Rather than that this should continue, I beg to give it up," said he; "I really cannot endure so unseemly a discussion in a house just stricken by the presence of death."

"Forgive me," said Mr. Bland, now speaking for the first time, "but I do most earnestly hope that Sir Guy Bohun will not withdraw from this

inquiry, and my reasons are these: for many years I had the honour of being the legal adviser—I, perhaps, may presume to add, the confidential friend, too—of the late Sir Felix Bohun; for many years I held all his papers, and it was I who drew up his first will, very shortly after this his third and last marriage. Knowing perfectly its contents, the present will, read this day, fills me with astonishment and.....and.....dismay.....”

An uneasy movement ran round the table, and Lady Bohun fidgetted on her chair.

“I wish to cast reflections on no one,” he continued; “I merely wish for justice—justice to be done to one who, I regret to say, shows a strong inclination to refuse to see justice done to himself!”

“Right, right!” murmured Mr. Blackstone, but he was instantly put down by the hasty exclamation of his daughter, who answered Mr. Bland herself.

“You mean then to insinuate, sir, that this will of my late husband’s is an unjust one?”

“Madam,” was his reply, “it is more than unjust, it is incomprehensible; but on my honour I believe we shall find it in our power to set it aside.....”(a sarcastic smile played on the features of Messrs. Deedes and Grim; a flush over those

of Lady Bohun, and an expression of supercilious contempt settled on the lips of Ponsford. To Sir Guy Bohun, her countenance was like a scene in a play, and fascinated his gaze, though he could not read it). "Three gentlemen present," added Mr. Bland, "have attested to the existence of a codicil to this will, a codicil so exactly resembling the document which I assisted to execute some years ago, that I have not a doubt but that Sir Felix, under some singular influ.....I mean delusion..... made this present will, and then repented it. I am sorry to seem unmannerly and rough in my mode of expression, but plain English alone will express the case in point."

"By which, sir, you mean," said Mr. Deedes, "that you believe *our* will to have been executed under a delusion, when Sir Felix was not accountable....."

"No, sir! I did not mean that, but I mean that a will of later date exists. On my soul, I believe it!"

"Then, sir, before we withdraw ours, produce *yours*," cried Mr. Deedes, violently.

"I wish I could, Mr. Deedes; but that is a point at which we have not arrived. We are coming to it, only I feared that Sir Guy Bohun was about to throw it up, disgusted, as well he

may be, by the scene through which we are passing. Now, Mr. Melville, will you have the goodness to continue your recital? All await it."

Yes, and with breathless interest, if one might judge from the faces round the table. So Mr. Melville took up his thread again.

"I left off," said he, "at the point where Sir Felix had been for some days, perhaps longer, in the habit of concealing this codicil, constantly changing its place of concealment, and now I must request Mr. Wheeler to complete the statement."

"I start from where Mr. Melville leaves off," said the doctor; "and I beg to say that I was with Sir Felix at the moment of his death, and am witness that his last sentences were to inform Sir Guy and myself that he had again hidden the paper in a new hiding-place, but that he had forgotten where that was. This thought brought on his death agony—I have no hesitation in saying so—but his very last word was, *Search*."

Mr. Wheeler paused, and Mr. Blackstone hastily exclaimed:—

"And have you done so?"

"We have, as far as searching the room; but I hope we may be permitted now, to extend our search to the farthest possible limits. Will Lady Bohun permit this?"

It was Mr. Blackstone who answered eagerly :
“Certainly, certainly, most unquestionably ! My dear Phemy, pray say yes. Gentlemen, my daughter is naturally overcome, but I feel sure every possible facility will be afforded you. Phemy, my dear ?”

“Papa,” said her ladyship, who had been smelling the salts which Ponsford, bending over her, had been administering ; “I am not the least overcome. I was fully prepared for this scene, so it cannot affect me much. But as for the request of these gentlemen, since it appears that Bohun Court hangs at present in abeyance.....”

“No, madam,” interrupted Messrs. Deedes and Grim in one breath ; “until the codicil is found, it belongs to your ladyship.”

“Then search,” cried Euphemia, her eyes flashing on all around her, as she rose majestically and prepared to leave the room ; “search the whole house and everything in it ; search from the roof to the basement ; take even the flooring up if you please, but until the codicil is found, I remain mistress of Bohun Court.”

“One moment,” said Mr. Melville, hastily, “one moment only, Lady Bohun ; should the paper not be found *in the room*, we shall be compelled to search the persons of those who were about Sir Felix at the last.”

Lady Bohun stood staggered, as it were.

"Who do you mean, who do you suspect?" said she, in a low voice, and deadly pale; "do you infer that any one in this house has secreted it."

"If you please, my lady," said Burley, instantly advancing; "I was in the room—I hope all my boxes may....." his voice faltered.

"My good Burley," exclaimed Sir Guy, "if any one on earth could find it by looking for it, it would be yourself.....but....."

"Oh! master, master!" cried the old man, wringing his hands; "how often I thought it would come to this; didn't I tell you my fears; and now, too, I know why you said, 'Let no one leave the house.'"

"Ha!" burst from the compressed lips of Lady Bohun; "all of you plotting against me?"

"Burley has volunteered to allow a search to be instituted," interrupted Mr. Melville, without heeding the remark; "so that course is clear. The next, or rather the *other* person present, was Mrs. Ponsford."

And he fixed his eye upon her.

"Ponsford!" exclaimed Lady Bohun; "I would as soon suspect myself!"

A peculiar smile crossed the faces of Mr. Bland and Mr. Melville. Both seemed struck with the

same thought, but they only smiled, and at that smile, Lady Bohun's pale cheek burned crimson.

"I was not present at the death of Sir Felix Bohun," said a cold, clear, calm voice.

"Am I to understand you object?" asked Mr. Melville.

"Certainly not, sir. Pray search wherever you please, provided only that I am present during the search."

Lady Bohun left the room in the pause that followed these words, and her father rushed after her.

"Phemy! Phemy, my child! give it up!" he cried; "here are three gentlemen all swearing to the existence of another—a later—a much more just and likely will, so give it up, my child, and rest satisfied with your magnificent dowry! Oh! Phemy, my Phemy! don't let your old father go about the world with a blush of dishonour on his cheek. Give it up—it is not too late—let me tell them you give it up, and let me say you wish to abide by what you know were the intentions of your husband?"

"Papa, are you mad?" exclaimed Lady Bohun, whose vehemence, now unchecked by the presence of so many strangers, burst forth with all the greater fury; "have you taken leave of your senses, that

you thus urge me to fall into what may be, for aught I know, a trap laid to rob me of my rights."

"A trap, Phemy! A trap where Mr. Bohun is concerned?" said her father, indignantly.

"Sir Guy Bohun," retorted Euphemia, who seemed to have a bitter sort of pleasure in giving him his new title as soon as possible, and as often as she could (feeling, probably, that he had had little else given to him); "Sir Guy Bohun may not be more immaculate than other disappointed heirs-presumptive! And then again, the insolence of his party—his myrmidons—presuming to insinuate that any one has stolen this codicil of theirs! The scandalous effrontery of daring to try and fix the theft on Ponsford!"

"Ah! my dear, there lies the worst feature in the case; that maid of yours has earned a very questionable reputation for herself, and I have told you all along that you would one day repent the dangerous influence that you have allowed her to gain. Phemy, my child, if you get clear out of this, let that woman go."

In vain Mr. Blackstone, in his simple, honest straightforwardness, pleaded; Lady Bohun only stormed all the more, and whilst this scene was being enacted in her own sitting-room, the rest of the party were searching the premises, the rooms,

the furniture, and lastly the boxes of every inmate of the house. Not an article remained unturned, and still, no codicil !

Then came the question, had any one left the house that day or the succeeding days? Had letters been sent to the post, and if so, by whom? This last idea was Mr. Wheeler's.

Yes; letters had been sent every day, but only in Sir Guy Bohun's handwriting. Lady Bohun had written none. For the presence of her father and mother she had telegraphed. Then who had taken the message to the telegraph office? Burley.

"That is satisfactory," said Sir Guy.

But who had taken the letters to the post? William, the stable helper.

Mr. Wheeler looked at Sir Guy, as much as to say, "Is that equally satisfactory?"

"I would not believe that man on his oath; we are foiled; we have, in fact, lost our clue," was Sir Guy's answer to the look of inquiry, "so do not question him on the subject."

And now they had exhausted all their resources. Everything that could be done had been done, and the crest-fallen *ci-devant* lawyers of the late Sir Felix Bohun were compelled to retire discomfited, and yield the field to the triumphant Deedes and Grim.

The story of Sir Felix having executed a codicil, and hidden it, and forgotten where, Lady Bohun now laughed to scorn. No matter to her that three gentlemen, honourable and trustworthy, swore they had seen it, and two had witnessed it; it was not to be found, and that, with her, was equivalent to its non-existence; so, besides laughing the story to scorn, she soon flatly announced her disbelief of it altogether.

And who heard her? Few who cared, save the neighbourhood, for all the old servants gave warning in a body, the moment they heard that Sir Guy was no longer master of Bohun Court; so, within six weeks after the death of Sir Felix, Mrs. Ponsford was sent up to town to choose new servants, and she brought down a whole bevy, her own position being now elevated to that of housekeeper and upper lady's maid, my lady having a young and humble French girl as a subordinate to wait on her, and obey Mrs. Ponsford in all things.

As for the neighbourhood, they all left their cards of condolence, and then there was a long lull, during which they had leisure to watch the proceedings of the widow, and judge how deeply she mourned, or how little she missed, him over whom a stately monument was standing in Bohun Churchyard. They had leisure, also, to wish mat-

ters had been otherwise. Many wished another in her place, and many made no secret of the fact that all the hearts round Bohun Court had gone away with Sir Guy Bohun, who had left the neighbourhood for good.

CHAPTER X.

MONTHS have passed since the stately monument was raised over the remains of Sir Felix Bohun. How many months?—thirteen; just one over the twelvemonth, and now let us look again at Bohun Court.

But is that Bohun Court? There is the wide lawn—there are the grass terraces—there stand the proud old oaks, and cedars, and chesnuts, and the beautiful groups of elms here and there—and the deer are feeding under the trees as usual, and the lake lies glittering peacefully in the sun—everything looks as it used to do, but where is the gray old house? where the darker gray towers, and the projections of every shape, up which ivy used to creep and wind, and cling like a living creature?

On the lawn, where the gray old house once stood, stands a house precisely the same in size, in

shape, in towers, battlements, and projections, but gray no longer. It stands there now, clad in a modern dress, glaring like a large spot through the trees, so as to be seen for miles and miles. Bohun Court has been whitewashed !

But it is thirteen months since the death of Sir Felix Bohun. Time enough for all his whims, or fancies, or wishes to be forgotten, just as completely as himself, and the lady of Bohun Court has other advisers now.

On the lake there is now an airy little boat with an awning. Beneath that awning, which protects them from a hot autumn sun, sit two figures. They have pushed off from the shore, and have been in deep conversation for the last two hours.

The lady is dressed in a suit of the most silvery gray, with costly ornaments of jet. She is tired of her sables, but she thinks gray is becoming, so is white and black, so she has a white silk parasol with a jet handle elaborately carved like coral. She wears no hat—a Spanish mantilla is quite enough for such a warm day, and much more becoming (so she is told), and she never tans or freckles, and if she did, it would not be unbecoming (so somebody tells her).

And now they are talking.

“ But, Sydney, people will say it is so soon ! ”

"Soon, Phemy!—a year and a half soon?"

"Only a year and a month, Sydney."

"Why do you count in that provokingly precise way? To me it seems ten years."

"Nevertheless, it is but one year and one month, and even if the neighbourhood do not exclaim, I am sure papa will. He was very angry the other day when he saw me in this gray dress, and when you plagued me into wearing that white muslin with the deep hems, he sent me upstairs again and made me change it."

"Well, really, Phemy, though I give you credit for as much youth and beauty as can well fall to the share of one individual, still I did not think you were quite such a child as you make yourself out."

"Oh! you may laugh as much as you please, but you will find when it comes to the point that it is all truth. Papa will be furious, and the neighbourhood scandalized."

"Then I may as well go abroad with my regiment instead of selling out. Perhaps, by the time I come back—some ten or fifteen years hence—you will consider a proper time to have elapsed."

"Nonsense, Sydney."

"Plain sense, Phemy mine. My heart is very sick, and you know what is said to cause that

heart-sickness. But, to put an end to these perpetual discussions, as well as my own misery, hear my final decision, Phemy. If you do not here, on this spot, in this boat, on this most lovely summer's evening, give me my answer, and that a favourable one, I drop these oars over the boat's side, and then here we must sit until Mrs. Blackstone, like a distracted hen, comes seeking her duckling, and finds it where Mr. Blackstone will assuredly punish it for being."

Phemy pouted, laughed, blushed, and turned her head away. Captain Aylmer pressed his suit, and she did not refuse to listen, but still the final answer was not given.

"I must think it over—I will see about it," said her ladyship, with a hesitation rather incomprehensible to her cousin.

"But you have thought it over, or told me you would, so very often, Phemy."

"Yes—but there are more people to be consulted than myself—more than one."

"Your mother is favourable—your father you can talk over, surely."

"Yes; but....."

"Beyond those two, on whom, after all, you bestow a power which is mere courtesy, you have to ask no one's leave."

"No; but....."

"Phemy, will you marry me?"

"Some day."

"Name that day."

"No, that, indeed, I cannot."

"Then I will name it myself. This is the last week in September. I will give you till the last week in October."

Lady Bohun threw herself back, and laughed heartily.

"Thank you. Could you not give me a day or two longer?"

"Phemy—the oars! Shall it be November, then?"

"No, I will not be married in November."

"Name your own month, your own day, and your own hour, but name it. No more thinking it over, Phemy. Say the word at once, and let us go home. The dews are rising. Look at the lawn covered with a white vapour. Phemy, we *must* go home."

He said "home" very naturally; it came quite easily from his lips as though it were a familiar sound to them, and so, in fact, it was. Captain Aylmer had been a constant inmate of Bohun Court ever since Euphemia had been its mistress. All the alterations were of his suggestion—all the

improvements (?) of his planning (the whitewashing of the gray walls to wit).

But there were other residents besides beneath that wide roof. Great changes had taken place in the domestic arrangements of Mr. and Mrs. Blackstone, for, thinking Euphemia too young to be alone, they had made up their minds, after much sorrowful consideration, to let The Laurels, in all its brightness and beauty, and take up their abode within the sombre halls of their daughter's stately and now splendid home.

It was not the life they liked, nor the place to please them, but they felt it their duty, and so turned a deaf ear to many broad hints thrown out by Lady Bohun as to their mean opinion of her conduct and discretion.

Mrs. Blackstone was very much the same sort of old lady who used to trot about the dainty walks of The Laurels, and count over her snowdrops and crocuses day by day, but upon Mr. Blackstone there had come a great and sudden change, and even his daughter hardly knew him at times. There was a restlessness and nervousness constantly present in his manner which gave him the appearance of always expecting something to happen. He went about amongst the society of the neighbourhood with an alarmed, downcast, half-uneasy

sort of look, and he had a habit of starting, when suddenly addressed, which often attracted attention and made people wonder.

There was a skeleton in that old man's heart, the skeleton of the lost codicil, which haunted him from room to room in that gloomy house and walked by his side wherever he moved. It glared before his eyes as he sat at his daughter's glittering table, and as he eat off the silver plates, which it was her delight to use in common every day, it seemed to stand whispering in his ear, "Not her's —not her's!"

His belief in the existence of that will, or perhaps rather his firm belief that it did once exist, was still as strong as on the memorable day when Mr. Melville, Mr. Wheeler, and Sir Guy Bohun, all announced that there was such a document; and he, who throughout a long life honourably spent in business, had never had a breath cast upon the brightness of his fair name, now felt as if every finger pointed at his child as an usurper, and at himself and her mother as accessories in her iniquity, for iniquitous was the only word the old man ever felt was strong enough to express the terrible light in which he looked upon the whole affair.

He could not sleep at night. He could not rest by day.

"My dear," he would say to his wife, over and over again, "I can never die happy till I find out what became of that paper. I was going to say—and I sometimes think, too—that I shall never be able to die at all until the mystery is solved."

"Dear Mr. Blackstone, I wish you would not fret so about it. You know the state Sir Felix was in—you remember his delusions—Phemy always says it was a delusion altogether."

"Happy for Phemy that she can thus quiet her conscience, my dear. *I* cannot. And as to delusions, Sir Felix may have had them, but that does not apply to Mr. Bohun—to Sir Guy."

"He never saw the paper."

"But Wheeler and Mr. Melville did."

"Yes, some weeks before—not up to the death of Sir Felix. He had opportunities to destroy it fifty times over between the execution of it and his death."

"Then some one must have found or seen the remnants. No, no! that is Phemy's reasoning—Phemy's *salve* as I call it! No, no; had Sir Felix been strong enough to wander about this great house, he might have concealed it where many a generation might never find it; but a sick

man, tied to his room, almost to his bed, incapable of walking three yards without assistance—not he ! I believe he wrote it—I believe he hid it—I believe its hiding-place was discovered—and I believe, honestly and solemnly, that it was made away with ! how or where, God only knows ; and all I can say is, whoever did it, may God forgive her !”

To the last word of this ejaculation, Mrs. Blackstone always thought it prudent to turn a deaf ear. She well knew with what her husband’s remarks on the subject generally ended, and so she always prepared a little cough to drown the last word. She had a sort of a dread of hearing it—of feeling that she lived under the same roof with the “her” denominated—that she breathed the same poisoned air—bent under the same yoke—bowed beneath the same strange, insensible influence.

But Ponsford still flourished—flourished like an upas tree—standing alone in her glory, and utterly indifferent to the opinions of any one around her. Her manner has undergone some little change since her accession ; she is more matronly, more supercilious in her silent *hauteur*, and she walks about giving orders with an air which puts even the dignity of Lady Bohun to shame.

Lady Bohun is graceful ; Mrs. Ponsford grand. The former commands ; the latter rules.

And now the couple who were sitting in the boat have come in.

Mrs. Ponsford awaited the return of Lady Bohun in her room—waited to dress her for dinner—and waited in a state of considerable displeasure, for Mrs. Ponsford was not accustomed to be kept waiting, neither did she approve that that liberty should be taken where her tea was concerned, consequently, she received Lady Bohun with marked displeasure.

“When your ladyship catches your death of cold, you will repent these hours spent sitting in that boat on the lake,” were the words that greeted the offender.

“Hours, Ponsford?—more likely an hour.”

“Much more like three, my lady. It is now a quarter to seven. I was in this room at six.”

“Dear me, Ponsford, I am sorry I have kept you waiting so long! Goodness! I shall never be ready in a quarter of an hour, unless I hurry to death.”

“Your ladyship cannot be dressed in a quarter of an hour. I have put off the dinner until half-past seven.”

“Oh!” Lady Bohun said nothing—looked nothing. She did not dare. But she exclaimed,

after a pause, "Where is Estelle? Somebody must tell papa—he will be so fidgetty....."

"I have already told Mr. and Mrs. Blackstone. Now, if you please, my lady; you have no time to sit in a reverie *here*; which dress is it to be?—the white?"

"Oh, no! Papa disliked it. My black net again. But why should I trouble you, Ponsford? Where is Estelle?"

"I dismissed Estelle. I intended to dress your ladyship myself this evening, for I was sure you would be chilled. How any one in their senses can go and sit in the damp of the evening, in a boat, on a lake surrounded by willows, surprises me. It is like madness; it is folly, to say the least of it."

"Never mind, my excellent friend," returned Lady Bohun, trying to laugh. (Gall were the words of that insolent menial—very wormwood her unanswerable reproaches.) "Never mind! perhaps it will not last much longer!"

"I should hope not," was Ponsford's reply.

"Why?" asked Euphemia, sharply; "what does it signify to anybody?"

"It signifies to yourself, my lady," was the cool retort, "not only as regards your health, but also as for what people say."

"Ah!" exclaimed Lady Bohun, with a sort of triumphant bitterness, "I flatter myself few people care less *what people say* than I do!"

"I do not agree with you, my lady. If you heard all the remarks *I* do, you would not be quite so indifferent; indeed, they would annoy you extremely."

"Then don't tell me—don't repeat them," said Lady Bohun, with some temper.

But Ponsford *did* mean to repeat them. It would not have suited her at that moment to be silenced, for she was out of temper herself. So she said,

"Yet I am not sure but that it is much better your ladyship should know, than not. It is impossible that things should go on at Bohun Court as they do, and people not take any notice. It is early days, my lady, and people *will* say so, though I were to go the whole round of the village and neighbourhood, and say it is only a cousin!"

She paused, but Euphemia spoke not a syllable. This was not the first time by many that she had had to listen, silently, to similar language. Her cheek might burn and her heart might beat, but speak—either to rebuke, to deny, or to excuse—she durst not! And well did her tormentor know this, so she continued,

"No one would believe me. If the truth could be told at once, your ladyship's good name would suffer much less than it does now, when every one looks upon it in the light of.....of a.....a....."

"A what?" cried Euphemia, who felt as if she could stand but very little more.

Ponsford hesitated—yes, even *she* hesitated ! but she had a bold stroke to play (she had her ends to gain), so she played it with as high a hand as she could.

"My lady, there is a great prejudice in the eyes of the world against attentions paid before a certain time has elapsed.....to.....to a young widow. People about here make no secret of saying what they think, and it is no use my contradicting....."

"I gave you no authority....." began Euphemia, half choking.

"No, my lady ; but I cannot listen in silence to reflections cast upon the mistress I serve....."

Euphemia bent her head in a sort of acknowledgment, but she was too indignant still, to be smoothed down without another layer of flattery.

".....and so I now keep within the immediate precincts of Bohun Court altogether—at all events until I can say openly, her ladyship is her own mistress, free to regulate her own time and her own actions, and free to make her own choice."

Without a moment's hesitation, Lady Bohun, hastily snatching up her gloves, turned upon her attendant.

"Say it, Ponsford," said she, with her eyes flashing, though they rested on nothing but the usual downcast eyelids (for Mrs. Ponsford very rarely looked you full in the face), "say it as soon as you please; you may even say, if you choose, that my choice is made."

She left the room without waiting to see the effect of her words. She descended the staircase with a heart beating so violently that each pulsation amounted to pain, yet she had a proud, though secret, satisfaction in knowing she had commanded herself before Ponsford.

Well, too well, she knew that that woman might insult her with impunity; her only comfort was in thinking that she could so control her feelings as to blind the vampire—thus draining her heart's blood—to the fact that she felt at all. Full well she knew that she was in her power. One word from Ponsford, and Sir Guy Bohun would be justified in a course to which he had as yet repeatedly declined to stoop, namely, to try the validity of the will. One word from Ponsford, and the world would have to judge in whom most faith was to be placed—in the servant, who swore to the undue

influence which had defrauded the direct heir, or in the wife, who—in full possession of the immense fortune and estates—swore that the servant had, for the sake of her two thousand pounds legacy, intimidated the old man into doing what he *had* done.

Lady Bohun had sense enough to know it would go against her, and so she was silent; but often and often, in moments of extreme bitterness, did her old father's oft-repeated tale of his younger days rise up in her memory, and, with a sigh of exquisite anguish, she would breathe in the hidden depths of her once high heart, his well-known *refrain*, "No tyranny like the tyranny of a servant!" What, then, must have been to so proud a spirit the reflection that this was the tyranny of a servant who had *a right* to tyrannize?—a servant in whose power she had wittingly placed herself? to whose mercy she had, in sober senses, sold herself?

No. There was no help for it; she must bear it, most likely to the last day of her life, and not only bear it smilingly, but tremble while she smiled, for she knew not from day to day, or hour to hour, whether she might not even then be betrayed.

Dame Euphemia Bohun trusted Mrs. Mira

Ponsford with everything she had in the world—trusted her, petted her, cajoled her at times, feared her, and dreaded her with a mortal dread—but as to having *confidence* in her?—no, *that* she had none!

So down she hurried to the drawing-room, not waiting to see the effect of her words, because she had an idea that Ponsford might not be pleased—might oppose her second marriage—might not find it so convenient to have a gay, thoughtless, wild young spendthrift at the head of affairs.

But her own mind was made up (as far as she was mistress of it). Unless absolutely prevented, she intended to marry Captain Sydney Aylmer, and that evening she meant to tell him so.

CHAPTER XI.

SIR GUY BOHUN lived in London now. He had chosen a quiet, gloomy, dark, and dull street, one end opening directly into Hyde Park, as his town residence, and had thus attained the long wished-for object of his ambition, a *pied-à-terre*.

He liked that sad and narrow street; it suited his frame of mind. He entered very little into society, and the circles he frequented were much of the same character as the street he had chosen, quiet and dull; but this, too, suited his frame of mind. He began to feel, or to fancy, he was growing old, a consciousness which sobers the merriest of us, so that gayer circles would not have been congenial to his temperament.

Reserved at the best of times, he was now more so than ever—a sort of haughty shyness which made him look (so Miss Maynard observed) as if he owed the world a grudge.

But there were some houses in which he *did* dine, and on one of these occasions, at the house of an old friend, he was agreeably surprised by hearing the names of Admiral and Miss Maynard announced.

Beyond casual meetings, and brief out-of-door greetings, he had had no opportunity of conversing with these once familiar neighbours since the death of Sir Felix ; therefore, it was with a feeling of pleasure, for some time unknown to him, that he found himself next to Miss Maynard at dinner.

He soon discovered that time had also wrought changes in even that gay, free nature. Miss Maynard was quieter, much more subdued, than in the days when she was the life and soul of Bohun Court, though the Admiral's voice still drowned every sound but its own.

Sir Guy never heard of Bohun Court now. It was as if a gulf yawned between it and him, and a gulf across which he was not even privileged to look, much less to speak ; consequently, when Miss Maynard began naturally to talk of affairs connected with her own home, she trod very near that cherished ground, and, at last, fairly asked him, "Is it painful to you to hear anything about Bohun Court?"

Sir Guy was glad the plunge was made.

"On the contrary," was his answer; "I shall listen with as much interest as though I had a right to be interested."

"Tell me first, have you heard anything?"

"Nothing. Against idle gossip I close my ears, but I should look upon no communication of yours in that light."

"Nor is it, I can assure you."

"But I augur from your manner, that you have some news to tell me?"

"I suppose I have, since I can see by yours that you know nothing."

"Nothing, indeed," said Sir Guy, sighing heavily; "and perhaps if I were wise, I should ask you to leave me in blissful ignorance; still, my heart sometimes yearns for tidings of the old place."

"You would hardly know it now," said Miss Maynard, in a low voice.

"All the better," replied Sir Guy, quickly; "if I were ever to see it again, and see it utterly transformed, I could better bear it, than to revisit it and recognise every stone and every tree."

"Rest happy, then, Sir Guy. The place is utterly transformed."

"What?" he exclaimed, suddenly turning towards her, "timber cut down?"

"Yes—many and many an old friend gone for ever."

"No additions, of course, to the house?"

"No—not that."

"But the inside?"

"Very much altered. Most of the rooms changed. The billiard-room is now the dining-room—the drawing-room scarcely ever entered. *Your* den is Lady Bohun's boudoir."

"That I always expected. Her ladyship failed to eject, though I knew she would succeed me. Well—then the ivy? Have the walls been cleared of that?"

"Completely."

"And what else? I see something more behind those considerate eyelids of yours. Raise them fearlessly—let me read the sword-stroke—what else has been done?"

"What you always dreaded—at least, so I fancy—remembering as I do the thrill of indignation with which you once heard suggested, an improvement which has now been adopted."

Sir Guy drew in his lips. "I can guess," said he; "yes, I can guess, and I am not sorry. I remember there was one turn in the line of railway from which I used to look down into the dark

valley, and see the knot of tall cedars which told where Bohun Court stood."

"Well," said Miss Maynard, "you may look down into the valley still, but you will not see that landmark, or rather that housemark, of cedars; but if you have a companion in the opposite compartment, you will most likely be asked....."

"What?"

"To whom does that large *white* house belong?"

Sir Guy gave a low, stifled groan. "And yet," said he, after a pause, "I am glad, very glad, for the reason I gave you. However, what is it to me? Why should I sigh, or grieve, or care? Yet I like to hear all about it. Is this what you had to tell me, Miss Maynard?"

"No, indeed!" said the young lady, trying to laugh, "I did not intend to make our host's dinner table so dismal. We have wandered very far from the original point. The news I had to tell you concerns Lady Bohun herself. Can you guess that, too?"

Sir Guy looked very grave.

"I see you do," she continued; "and I half wish it had not been I who brought the distasteful intelligence first under your notice."

"I must have heard it, or seen it, some time or other—it little matters."

"Ah, but so soon!"

"What else could be expected?"

"I assure you the neighbourhood thought better of her. We are all infinitely disgusted, and the Admiral declares he shall not return home until after it is over."

"You do not mean," exclaimed Sir Guy, "that it is to take place immediately?"

"I do indeed—within two months—and though I do not like you to think I am the retailer of all the county scandal, still whispers do go round, and people do say, that if the bridegroom-elect were not to announce publicly his prompt intentions, his creditors would not be quite so patient as they have suddenly become."

"Poor wretch!" murmured Sir Guy, as if thinking aloud.

"Which?" asked Miss Maynard, slyly.

After dinner, when the gentlemen rejoined the party in the drawing-room, Sir Guy Bohun instinctively made his way towards Miss Maynard.

"I have been talking to the Admiral," said he, "and I am sorry and shocked to hear the general reports of the state of Captain Aylmer's affairs. Can Mr. Blackstone know that he is over head and ears in debt?"

"And that the depth of that debt, which covers

his handsome head and ears, will exhaust about three years of Lady Bohun's income? No! depend upon it, Papa Blackstone has been kept in profound ignorance of the interesting fact; and I am told, on the best authority, namely, the old lady, that when her husband anxiously seeks to meddle in the affairs of his daughter and his nephew, they both tell him, in polite words, that they are no business of his!"

"So she flings herself into the abyss without a hand stretched out to save her?"

"One hand did try—not perhaps to save, but to prevent—one hand, whose owner's motives generally are somewhat questionable. Mrs. Ponsford—our dear friend, the vampire—does not like the match!"

"Upon what grounds does she disapprove?"

"Singularly enough, upon plausible grounds; that Captain Aylmer will play ducks and drakes with my lady's money, and that she will not stay and see it done."

"Then she is to leave?"

"She says she will. We shall see. I do not know how it will be arranged, but I somehow doubt her ever letting go her hold of Lady Bohun. She makes too good a thing of it."

All this was only what Sir Guy Bohun had expected to hear, whenever he *did* hear anything of

Bohun Court ; it was only what he had always anticipated.

"It is the story finished," said he ; "and, like a badly written novel, it has finished exactly as we expected."

"Don't say finished yet," replied Miss Maynard ; "as far as my judgment goes, we are only, as yet, in the middle of it. But as I have told you all that I know upon the subject, I will not wear it threadbare, but ask you something new. Have you been introduced to that frightened-looking little woman in rose-colour, talking to our host?"

"Our opposite neighbour at dinner, who made a succession of pyramids of bread crumbs all dinner-time?"

"Did you really observe her so closely ? Well, do you know that you were yourself an object of the most intense interest to her?"

"I, Miss Maynard ? and why so?"

"Do you know who she is ? and that pale, severe husband of hers?"

"I was not introduced to them."

"I thought you might have caught the name—Mr. and Mrs. Charles Topham."

"The name seems familiar ; but I suppose I am growing stupid, as well as old ; where have I heard it?"

“The Tophams? Mr. and Mrs. Charles Topham, Lady Mary, and old Lady Merivale?”

Sir Guy struck his hand on his forehead with a gesture of vexation at his stupidity.

“What must they think of me, when we knew Lady Mary so well?”

But it was now too late in the evening to repair his fault of omission; the guests were dispersing, and Mr. and Mrs. Topham were going to another party, and made their exit hastily, so that Sir Guy saw them depart, believing that he had seen the last of them, and regretting it as one of the many lost opportunities of his life, small as the loss was; however, in this he was mistaken.

The following morning whilst he was out walking, taking his *constitutional*, a gentleman called and left a card, with a message that he would call again.

It was Mr. Charles Topham.

“What can he want?” thought Sir Guy Bohun, for the proceeding was irregular, seeing that it was Sir Guy who should have taken the initiative, and he puzzled himself for some time over the question.

For one individual to take the trouble of calling upon another twice in one day betokened something unusually important. If Sir Guy called at a

friend's house twice in six months, he considered the act meritorious. But then he suddenly recollected what Miss Maynard had said—that all dinner-time he had been an object of the most intense interest to Mrs. Charles.

“In the name of goodness, why, and wherefore?” thought Sir Guy again to himself, and all that afternoon he was fidgetty and nervous, until, at a late hour, the expected guest arrived.

Mr. Topham was not a person to keep an audience in suspense. He was a small, thin, dark, and sallow man, with a rapidity of utterance and an abruptness of manner which was calculated to flurry and confuse even the most composed listener; and no sooner was he in Sir Guy's presence, than he rushed into his subject with merely a brief apology for breaking through the rules enjoined by strict etiquette.

“But, Sir Guy,” he exclaimed, “we are fellow-sufferers; you will excuse me for saying so, but I look upon you as a fellow-victim. You must forgive my using the term.”

Sir Guy Bohun was mystified, and looked the surprise he felt. Mr. Topham saw it, for nothing escaped his eye, and continued,

“When I had the pleasure of meeting you last

night," said he, "old days recurred vividly to my mind....."

"So they did to mine," interrupted Sir Guy, "and I reproached myself for having been so remiss as not to introduce myself to you as an old friend of your family."

"The fault was mine, Sir Guy," persisted his excitable visitor; "for I knew I was to meet you; but I have been for some time in such a fever of anxiety, that really when the moment arrived, I lost the courage to address you, feeling, as I did, that if I opened my lips at all in conversation with you, it could but be on one subject—the subject which I think you will say is common between us both, because, as I before observed, Sir Guy, I regard you as a fellow-victim."

Sir Guy had not a word to say to this strange address. He could only bow in silence, and wait an explanation, whilst a passing thought occurred to him that surely no friend would have invited him to meet at dinner a man bereft of his senses, otherwise.....

But Mr. Topham merely took breath, and then set off again.

"I have thought the matter over long and carefully, Sir Guy; my brother and I have spent days and nights in turning the subject in our minds,

marvelling if we could in any way find a loophole ; we have consulted lawyers after lawyers, in the vain hope of finding some redress, but we have been obliged at last to withdraw into our own homes, baffled, disappointed men, doomed to chew the bitter cud with only this atom of consolation, which is, that we *know* ourselves to be victimized, though we cannot help it !”

And here, a pause gave Sir Guy an opportunity of edging in a word.

“The painful circumstances to which you, of course, allude,” he began, “are well known to me, as you may easily suppose, from our long friendship with both poor Lady Merivale and your sister-in-law, Lady Mary.....”

“Of course they are !” burst in Mr. Topham ; “of course, you know perfectly how completely my brother was taken by surprise by the extraordinary and unaccountable bequests contained in Lady Mary’s will ; but, still more, how utterly overwhelmed he was when, upon the death of Lady Merivale, valuable plate, property, and immense sums of money were left away from him, although all his married life he had been induced to believe himself sole heir, whether Lady Mary survived her mother or not. All this, Sir Guy, you know well ; but what I came to bring before your notice, what

I came to tell you, firmly persuaded of the fact, and doubting if it has struck you in a similar light, is, that we are victims, Sir Guy! we are fellow-victims—and we are victimized by the same power!”

“By that woman, Ponsford?” said Sir Guy, quietly raising his eyes.

“You are right—you have hit it; by that infamous woman, whom the finger of the law has as yet been unable to touch! But, Sir Guy, our day may yet come; if I have been able to arouse in you the same suspicions that fill my own mind, I may possibly be able, also, to persuade you to assist me by your co-operation?”

“For what good?” asked Sir Guy, now seeing clearly at what his visitor was driving; “what possible advantage can arise from our stirring in a matter in which we have nothing but suspicions to stand upon?”

“Then you have also your suspicions?”

“I did not say so; but, from what I gather from yourself, Mr. Topham, *you* have nothing else!”

“But I think I have! that is what brought me here to-day. I think I can lay hold of facts now, or, at all events, of *one* fact, and if I could only secure your assistance to back up my suspicions...”

"Ah!" interrupted Sir Guy Bohun, "as I said before, suspicions will not do. Lawyers will grasp a fact with pleasure, but a suspicion serves only to eat into our own hearts."

"You are beginning to see it in my light!" cried Mr. Topham, charmed at the tone of bitterness which the voice of Sir Guy assumed as he uttered these words, "and now let me tell you that I have great hope that I *have* a fact to stand upon. My wife.....you saw her last night.....perhaps you did not observe that she is a particularly timid person.....she is of a very nervous temperament, so much so that till now the very mention of that night when Lady Merivale died, and when she saw, through the half-open door, that woman Ponsford holding the pen in the dying old lady's hand, has been sufficient to throw her into hysterics! Now, however, she has somewhat recovered, and by dint of constant persuasion and remonstrance, my brother and I have almost extorted from her a promise that she will, if necessary, come forward and swear to that fact!.....observe, I say, *fact*—this is my fact!.....so that I now propose going to our lawyer, old Bland, and asking him his opinion, and if he advises our acting, then, as far as my wife's evidence is concerned, we will seize her in the humour, and strike whilst the iron is hot."

Mr. Topham again paused, breathless ; but Sir Guy did not take up the thread immediately, for he did not quite see why *he* was made the depository of this vehement story ; neither could he quite understand how he was required to assist ; neither did he quite comprehend how they were fellow-victims, except that, perhaps, the world saw in both himself and Mr. Topham, men who had foolishly built expectations which destiny had not realised.

After a momentary hesitation, he put these thoughts into words, but, like a cat springing on a mouse, Mr. Charles Topham pounced upon his doubts.

“ My dear Sir Guy, our cases are strangely similar ; pardon me, but I have considered it a duty to acquaint myself with every word of the will of your late brother, and I there see that the person most benefitted by the codicil of Sir Felix is Ponsford ! ergo, she had a hand in it.”

Sir Guy laughed, in spite of himself.

“ Yes,” continued Mr. Topham, “ had *only* Lady Bohun benefitted, I might have had my doubts, for we all know the power a young wife may gain ; but this woman has actually made her fortune by it ! perhaps she has not finished even now ! perhaps she may go on till she gets more and more, and very likely she will ; but what I ask is, is it to be

allowed to continue? Are we to permit it? Are we to submit in passive silence?"

"*I* must," replied Sir Guy, "for I have no alternative. I have nothing in *my* case tangible."

"But I think *we* have," said Mr. Topham.

"I begin to think so, too," returned Sir Guy; "but if you will not consider me very impertinent in making use of a very homely phrase, will you allow me to say, that I would not advise you to bark unless you are very sure you can bite. Did Lady Merivale ever make a will varying very greatly with the codicil which dispersed the property so widely?"

"Most assuredly she did! we have it in our possession. So did Sir Felix."

"True; but my brother unhappily forgot where he concealed his fresh one."

"Which means," said Mr. Topham, with as much indignant warmth as though the case were his own, "that you never found it! Ah! villany! villany from first to last! Do you think, Sir Guy, that he had not good reasons for finding it necessary to conceal it at all?"

"That is not a question in point now," replied Sir Guy, quietly, "it was never found."

"I stand corrected, and beg your pardon," said Mr. Topham, "only it all bears strongly upon my

case, you must allow. It was never found. No. Nor will it be, as long as that woman lives.....”

“No—honestly,” interrupted Sir Guy, “I exonerate her there. I do not know what the world may say, but it was my brother who, with his own hands, either concealed or destroyed (in the weakness of approaching death) that will. Ponsford may have had a hand in the will which has been proved, and is now in force, but with the lost one, I.....”

He was apparently going to assert more than, on consideration, he felt he could conscientiously do, and stopped suddenly.

“Well, but to return to our point,” resumed Mr. Topham; “what I wish is, that doubly armed with *your* story to add weight to *ours*, we should all go to Bland, and ask his advice as to whether we are not justified in taking some fresh steps for the recovery of our rights.”

“Bland has all the particulars of *my* story at his fingers’ ends,” said Sir Guy, with a smile; “I believe he grieves over it more than I do, and as to its adding weight to yours, it will hardly do that; it will but add further proof of the extraordinary pitch to which the influence of a confidential servant can be carried—nothing more. I confess my own feeling is, let Ponsford alone. She has shown

skill enough to carry her points, so, depend upon it, she has art enough to conceal her means if foul, and to baffle her pursuers should the law attempt to follow her windings."

"Still you have no objection my commenting to Bland on the singular coincidences that exist between your case and mine?"

"Not the slightest. I wish it may do you any good. But about Lady Mary Topham's will—I forget the particulars?"

"Her first will had been in my brother's possession ever since they married. Her settlements required that she should make one, and she did so very early in their married life, leaving him everything. Imagine then his feelings, when, after her death, this woman, this detestable confidential servant, this insidious Ponsford, glides noiselessly into his room with her cold, glassy face....."

"How like her!" thought Sir Guy.

".....glides up to his side, and lays down a paper before him which proved to be his wife's *last* will! and in this, a *suite* of pearls so large, so pure, so perfect, that money could scarcely buy them, was left as a legacy to the woman herself! A set so rare from their peculiar shape that my brother believed them matchless, left to this creature, who, of course, could only want them to sell, one by one.

Ask yourself, Sir Guy, is it probable or possible that Lady Mary would, without coercion, have done this?"

"Coercion is another point not tangible in our case," said Sir Guy; "you did not prove coercion."

"Alas, no! But that was a dead loss to my brother of something like three thousand pounds; then, the handwriting of the will was so unlike my sister's usual firm style, yet unhappily, even here we were foiled, for her own mother swore to it—lastly, who turned Lady Merivale against us, except that woman?—who but she could have dictated the disposal of old plate and jewels of which only ourselves knew the existence? yet it was all willed away!"

"And this is the will you are now proposing to set aside?"

"To prove a forgery, my dear Sir Guy; to prove that no living hand signed it."

"But there were witnesses?"

"Yes, two; one, the young doctor to whom a good deal was left, so of course *his* tongue was quiet enough; the other, who do you think? You will never guess. A young man who was just then acting as footman in place of a sick servant, a young fellow, half boy, half man, who happened to be at hand in the hurry of the moment, and

whom Ponsford herself had engaged *pro tem.*, as he was doing nothing at Bohun Court just then—that young groom of yours, Sir Guy.”

“William!” exclaimed Sir Guy, now feeling startled for the first time; “impossible!”

“Perfectly true. Well then, to make my story more singular, Ponsford was not Lady Merivale’s servant at the time of the old lady’s death—she was *yours*—I mean she was Lady Bohun’s—yet she never left that poor old woman long alone; she pretended her own maid did not understand her; she was there night and day, constantly, and we all used to say what an indulgent mistress Lady Bohun must be, for actually the woman was more in our house than her’s.”

Sir Guy’s face was now hidden in his hands. Even his unsuspecting nature at last saw something like a plot, and he was trying to remember dates, and put things together. He had been absent from town the whole time himself, but he distinctly recollected William’s being sent for, and thinking at the time that it was to assist Sir Felix in his increasing infirmities.

“And it is this will,” said he, at last, “that you mean to prove invalid?”

“We mean to try it again, we have tried once—tried to prove it a forgery, but failed; we shall

now try it on other grounds. Sir Guy, I come back to where I began. The woman who has so injured us, has also deeply injured you."

"This we cannot prove. *You* have both facts and suspicions. I doubt if *I* can say I have even suspicions."

"In your heart you *must* have, though I agree with you that suspicions are of little use to you. Still, the woman's conduct has laid her open to most serious suspicions; and, I confess, I am not one to allow the grass to grow any longer under my feet. I must be up and stirring, and if the investigation I mean to institute should bring any of your mysterious affair to light.....you shall see me again, Sir Guy."

And with the same vehemence that had marked his entrance, Mr. Charles Topham made his exit, leaving Sir Guy Bohun thoughtful, perplexed, and uncomfortable.

The visit had been brief, yet it had completely upset the tranquillity into which Sir Guy thought he had subdued himself for ever.

"I wish the man had left me alone," was the thought uppermost in his mind; "I was very well as I was. Now, he has opened all the old wounds, roused all the old bitterness, set me going again—but no, it shall not be. *My* case is clear, what-

ever his may be. He may prove *his* wills forgeries, but mine is a case of a lost codicil—both will and codicil being undeniably valid, unless, indeed, I were to say, as poor Felix said himself, that he was intimidated into making it—and if I did, what then? Would any one believe me?—no! Could I prove it?—no—nor any one else! Mrs. Ponsford has taken precious good care of that. Confound that meddling fellow, Topham! I wish he had never known of my existence in town, for now I shall have no peace, unless I go.....and if I go.....where have I to go?"

Bitter thought! the man who had lived for an object all his life, now deprived of that object—his home. No wonder that he asked himself the question, where have I to go? To him there was but one place in the world, only one spot which contained the smallest interest for him, and that was Bohun Court.

But luckily there at last occurred to him a resource—the resource of the weary in body and the weary in mind; the resource equally of the idle or busy, the gay or the melancholy; the haven of the wealthy, the refuge of the poor; there was one other spot than Bohun Court where he could flee like the dove of old, and be at rest. He could go abroad.

And the next time Mr. Charles Topham called at the door of his fellow-victim's house in that sad, dull, narrow street, the answer he received was, that Sir Guy Bohun had gone abroad.

CHAPTER XII.

TURN we once more to Bohun Court.

The lady sits in her easy chair before her costly toilet table, and her long black hair is passing and re-passing between the slender fingers of the abigail who waits on her. That mirror reflects back two faces; one, pale to transparency, and passionless; the other wearing the stamp of care and vexation, with a shadow on the brow seemingly too deep for one so young.

“Which dress, my lady?”

“I do not care.”

A gray one was produced.

“No, no! not that odious thing.”

“White, my lady?”

“No, not white. Be quick, and don’t worry me.”

“Your ladyship is not going to wear a *coloured* dress?”

“Why should I not, Ponsford? Surely it is high time?”

High time! yes, for all that the poor old man was mourned, it *was* high time for colours; the young widow had laid aside her weeds the very day on which the twelvemonth of (supposed) mourning had expired; she had laid aside her crape as soon as she possibly could; she had glided into gray, veiled with black lace, the moment fashion sanctioned the change; she had assumed white to please the eye of him who aspired to fill the place of the dear departed, and she had now taken a step which justified her resuming the colours she had so long resigned.

So long! yes, a whole year and a half! but Sir Felix had been forgotten nearly as long; the mask might be cast off now. Another reigned in his stead.

“High time, I am sure,” repeated the scornful beauty, eyeing with some satisfaction a mauve velvet dress just arrived from town: “yes. I will wear that to-night, for a particular reason.”

She paused. She wished to be helped out of the sentence, and Ponsford was in the humour to assist her, for it would answer her purpose.

“It is quite cold enough for it, my lady, though it is February.”

"Not for that reason, Ponsford, as you may easily guess."

"No, my lady; but for one of the reasons."

"Then guess the other."

"You have fixed the day, my lady." (Almost inaudibly.)

"Why, Ponsford, you are a conjuror!—how could you possibly know?"

"I merely guessed, my lady.....I think your ladyship once said that when the year and a half had expired....."

Lady Bohun leant back in her chair, and covered her face in her hands.

"Oh, Ponsford!" she exclaimed, with a touch of natural feeling, "I hope, *I hope* I have not done a foolish thing, but I have been worried into it. They have given me no peace. If I had but had a friend in the world to help me.....but I have been obliged to answer entirely on my own judgment; and oh! if I should have made a mistake! Ponsford, do you think I shall repent?"

"Madam, I hope not."

"Ah, you think I shall! but perhaps not—perhaps.....but it is done now, and I cannot retract. It is to be in three weeks, Ponsford! Good heavens! how little time that seems. Oh,

Ponsford, if I should repent before the time comes !”

“Better than repenting afterwards, my lady.”

“But, Ponsford, after all, it will not be such a very great change in my position. I mean to retain entire right over the whole of my property, and draw all my own cheques.”

Ponsford smiled.

“You doubt it?”

“No, my lady; but I doubt a husband’s approving such an arrangement !”

“But I mean to be firm. I am not going to give up my property as well as my liberty.”

“Ah ! if your ladyship likes liberty, no independence like the independence of a widow,” remarked the confidential servant, shrewdly.


Euphemia was silent. She felt the truth of that remark, but it came too late. She was afraid of acknowledging, even to herself, that she had thrown from her what she loved best in the world next to her money, and that was indeed her independence ; what good was it to look back ?—none ! for she had fixed the day.

A large party from the neighbourhood dined at Bohun Court that evening to meet Captain Aylmer ; and Mrs. Blackstone was commissioned by her daughter to announce to their various friends, in

official whispers, that this was his last visit previous to his marriage with Lady Bohun.

This was no difficult task. Everybody knew what they were going to be told, and all had but one opinion, that that rich and beautiful young widow was throwing herself away upon a spendthrift and a *roué*, for Captain Aylmer's character was no secret to any one except his own immediate and numerous family. *They* only said Sydney had been wild and a little extravagant, but so were all young men! *They* thought it was a very natural match. Phemy was rich now, and might marry whom she pleased, and she always liked Sydney, only her parents looked higher.

And poor Phemy, she was wretched that evening. In vain she saw her intended, radiant; it only depressed her still more. In vain all her splendour glittered round her; she felt as if claws were grasping and clutching it out of her possession. It was a foretaste of what was coming. It was her independence slipping away from her with her widowhood; three more weeks, and for the second time she would be bound by a vow to love, honour, and obey. The first—yes, she liked Sydney Aylmer. The second—no, impossible! The third!—Euphemia Lady Bohun felt she was not born to obey!



"But as long as I am mistress of my money," thought she, "Sydney will obey *me*."

Poor soul! how long would that be? For just the few moments that would suffice to tie the irrevocable knot! after which, Euphemia Lady Bohun, you are a wife again, and moreover Captain Sydney Aylmer's wife, and you must arm for the contest *without* your independence to support you!

But first, mistress and maid must have a conference. Both know they have to come to some conclusion, and Lady Bohun charges first.

"Ponsford," she began, about a week before the wedding was to take place, "you and I must think over our plans for the future now that matters are drawing to a close. I do not yet know whether it is you or Estelle who mean to accompany me to the Isle of Wight." (Lady Bohun knew the disposition of her second husband rather too well to arrange a tour including Paris this time.)

Ponsford was standing by a large table as Lady Bohun addressed her, and on the table, which was a circular one, lay all her ladyship's multiplicity of jewel-cases, so that, as they conversed, she could move slowly round, either facing her mistress or not, as the occasion required. It was with head averted, that she replied,

"I think your ladyship would find Estelle do

very well, and it would be a pleasant change for her."

"Very well, Ponsford. I am quite satisfied with her powers. But about you? Sometimes I have fancied you had plans which might interfere with mine?"

"Oh, my lady! I should always endeavour that such should not be the case."

"I don't mean in that way, Ponsford. I mean that when we were in town I had an idea that..... that you had intentions somewhat similar to those which I am now about to put into execution myself?"

"You are right, my lady; but that is an affair of old standing, and quite optional with myself. I may choose my own time, and entirely consult my own convenience."

"Lucky woman!" exclaimed Euphemia, with unguarded bitterness; "there are people in the world who would be glad to be you! But, however.....I am sure I wish you well.....is it that cousin in the Albany?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Then you will leave me, Ponsford?"

As Lady Bohun asked the question, her heart seemed positively to cease beating. Ponsford engaged to be married? Ponsford going to leave

her? Ponsford about to resign her post without compulsion, in a friendly spirit?—the incubus of years to rise from her burdened victim, and leave the victim free?

Now, now for the first time, did Euphemia feel all she had gone through, and realize the unutterable joy and relief which such a departure would bring—yet it seemed too good to be true; tremulous with suspense, yet not daring to show the delight that was quickening every pulse, she waited for Ponsford's answer; and as the noiseless step moved round the table, and the delicate hands fingered the costly clusters of diamonds, rubies, and emeralds, whilst the pale countenance completely averted itself, the dropping of a pin might have been heard above the voice which replied,

“That rests entirely with your ladyship.”

“With me?” exclaimed Lady Bohun, surprised; “how can that possibly be? Do you mean that as a married woman you would still retain this situation?”


“My lady, my marriage is, as I said, fixed for no particular day, month, or even year; I am simply engaged. Mr. Ponsford and I are both accustomed to much comfort and even luxury; we are neither of us so young as to think we could put up with love and indifferent lodgings.”

“But, Ponsford”—Euphemia’s heart palpitated painfully—“I thought your cousin was very well off; and as for you”—she tried to smile convulsively—“I always look upon you as quite an heiress. Few people can boast as you can, of living to possess the income of no less than three legacies.”

“It is true, my lady; but my life has been one of servitude. My youth has been devoted to those I have served, and my old age must be one, not only of rest, but of perfect comfort and competence, otherwise it would not answer my purpose to retire.”

Lady Bohun’s breath came short and quick. She saw, what indeed she ought perfectly to have known by that time, that there would be no getting rid of Mrs. Ponsford, unless Mrs. Ponsford chose to be got rid of. But the bright prospect of release having once opened before Euphemia’s weary eyes, she could not resign it without another effort. She felt that whilst her income was yet within her own power, there was no sacrifice she would not make, only to feel herself free!

Never before had that old story of her father’s come back so vividly, so truthfully, so fearfully, to her recollection. Often had she laughed at it, laughed it down, and treated it as the old man’s favourite delusion; yet now it stood before her in



its bare truth, pointing at her like an accusing spirit, "No tyranny like the tyranny of a servant!"

"Then you do not feel at present as if you were sufficiently affluent to try the great lottery?" said she, tremblingly.

"I feel, my lady, more as if there were still plenty of time," was the cautious answer.

And now Euphemia's difficulty was, how to smooth the way so artfully that her tormentor should take it without a suspicion that her services were being gladly dispensed with.

"It is a tantalizing state, Ponsford," she began.

"Oh, *dear* no, my lady!" exclaimed Ponsford, with her most sarcastic, but gentle laugh; "I am in no hurry, and Mr. Ponsford is doing very well."

"So are you," thought Euphemia; but she continued aloud, "I am sure, Ponsford, if anything I could do would assist you to complete what you require, you have only to say so. I intended to make you a present on my marriage, and intended to choose it myself, but under present circumstances, perhaps you would rather select what would be most agreeable and useful to you, yourself?"

Ponsford inclined her head on one side over a case of rubies which Euphemia had spent a fortune upon.

"Good heavens!" thought she, "surely the woman is not going to choose those?"

"You are very good, my lady; very kind and liberal as you always are," replied Ponsford, at last; "but perhaps at such a moment as this, it might not be convenient to your ladyship to give what I should like best, so that really, perhaps, we may as well let the matter rest for the present. I am very well as I am; very happy and comfortable at Bohun Court, and most reluctant to inconvenience your ladyship in the slightest point, even in such a trifle as my leaving you, for it *is* a trifle to *you*, my lady, since Estelle....."

"Ponsford," said Lady Bohun, dreadfully agitated, yet alarmed lest her companion should see and take advantage of it; "let us put ourselves and our selfish interests out of the question for the present. Let us think of the future. Would it suit you best, in a worldly point of view, to remain with me, or to go?"

"Oh! madam, *that depends*."

"Upon what?"

Ponsford was silent. She was balancing a diamond ear-ring of great value on one finger.

"Can it be jewels she wants?" thought Lady Bohun, and she remembered Lady Mary Topham's

pearls. "Upon what, then, does it depend, Ponsford?" she repeated.

"Madam, you were so good as to say you were thinking of making me a present?"

"Yes, so I was."

"Might I ask.....was it to be in a pecuniary form, my lady?"

"Why, it certainly was, because you know, as well as I do, Ponsford, that money buys everything. But if your prospects are what I suspect, perhaps furniture is what you would like best?"

"Oh! no, thank you, my lady."

"Can it be a house?" thought Euphemia, and there flitted through her mind a vision of Ponsford installed on the estate, absent in person, but ever present in spirit and influence—the upas tree growing in her very garden)—no! that could not be; if she were to leave at all, she should leave altogether. Once quit of her, then free!

Oh! hope delusive! vision most absurdly vain!

"Well, then, it is money," said her ladyship, briskly; "and I think your choice is very wise, since, as I said, money buys everything and everybody. The rich have always friends, so take my advice, Ponsford, and, when you marry, do as I do, and look sharply after your money. Come, here is my cheque book—there—'Pay Mrs. Pons-

ford'—signed 'Euphemia Bohun'—what shall it be? I am going to fill it up; will.....will....."—her voice faltered—"five hundred pounds buy your wedding suit, Ponsford?"

There was a dead silence, and Lady Bohun dared neither break it, nor raise her eyes, for she did not comprehend it. Was the amount so immense that words failed the grateful recipient, or was it not sufficient?

"Madam," said the thrilling voice; "the sum is handsome beyond my expectations; indeed, I could not accept anything so large *in one sum*. Your ladyship will forgive me, but I cannot allow a cheque to be made out in my name for more than *two hundred pounds*."

Lady Bohun breathed again. "Very well, Ponsford. You shall please yourself. If you like it better by instalments, so be it. Here, then, is your cheque for two hundred pounds, and two hundred more shall be forthcoming on demand. I shall even then owe you another hundred, but you have been a good servant and friend to me in many ways, so when the day comes that you ask me for the fifth hundred, I will make it a clear *six*, so that you will have three cheques of two hundred each. Does that please you? I can get

it all made out by Deedes and Grim in case of any accident to me."

"Madam, I cannot thank you sufficiently," said Ponsford; "but may I ask, are these all to be cashed on *your* marriage or on *mine*?"

"Upon my word, a very sharp question!" laughed Euphemia, so elated with her emancipation, that she would not see a certain coldness of tone in the words of thanks which would have struck any one else; "on mine, of course; but if you like, I can get the three cheques cashed now, at once, so as to be safe, and place the money immediately for you, wherever you please."

"I do not think that would suit me," said Ponsford, calmly; "the arrangement I should wish made will require the assistance of Messrs. Deedes and Grim, inasmuch as I wish this sum of two hundred pounds to be put in the shape of an annuity."

Lady Bohun started.

"An annuity!" she echoed; "how do you mean?—an annuity—what?—oh, I understand, an annuity for three years."

"No, my lady; an annuity is *for life*."

Lady Bohun turned in her chair, and looked Ponsford full in the face.

"I am to pay you two hundred a year *for life*?" she repeated, slowly and distinctly.

Ponsford met the gaze without flinching.

"Yes, my lady; *for my life*."

Euphemia threw back her head with the haughty, dauntless air she so seldom ventured to assume before Ponsford, and exclaimed—

"Ponsford, you have taken leave of your senses. You must be joking."

"Indeed, madam, I am not."

"I am to pay you two hundred a year *for your life*, when you have already received two thousand pounds out of the estate. Good heavens! do you know what you are saying?"

"Perfectly, my lady. That is the sum that I require, on leaving you—*if* I leave you."

"If? do you presume....."

"Madam, such words are unnecessary; I have named my terms. I think your ladyship will find on consideration that you had better comply with them, but if this should not suit you—why then I remain at Bohun Court."

"Ponsford," said Euphemia, after a moment's hesitation, words and voice alike failing her from concentrated indignation and anger; "it appears to me that you and I had better understand one another."

"I think we do, madam, perfectly," was the reply. Ponsford was so calm, it was so impossible to irritate her, that no words can describe the state of exasperation into which her manner roused those who did not possess the same equanimity.

"Explain yourself, then," said Lady Bohun, afraid of trusting herself to say more, and Ponsford began.

"You understand, my lady, I am sure, that I have served you *and your interests* to the best of my ability....."

"For which you have been munificently paid!" interrupted Euphemia.

"Your ladyship must also understand that services such as I have rendered are *rewarded*—not only *paid*. If your ladyship alludes to the legacy of two thousand pounds, I do not call that munificent; the interest of that sum will yield me at the uttermost, one hundred a year. I do not call that sum by any means commensurate with the income I have been the means of securing to yourself."

"*You* the means! Upon my word....."

"Yes, madam, I. It was I who first told you that Bohun Court would be left away from you; it was I who instigated you to dictate the will now in force; it was I, who, by dint of the most un-

wearied watchfulness, and in defiance of opposition on all sides, saw that that will was made.....”

“By which, Ponsford, you have been a gainer to an amount which, if you recollect, called from all those present at the reading of it, expressions of the greatest surprise, to use a mild term.”

“I treat individual opinions on such occasions with perfect indifference,” said the fair legatee; “but I am showing your ladyship how far we do, or ought to, understand one another. To continue. That will was executed under the influence of intimidation.”


Euphemia clenched her hands, and Ponsford saw the action.

“Yes, my lady; we both intimidated Sir Felix, I can bear witness to that fact any day I please.”

“So can I,” hastily ejaculated the lady.

“True, madam; but, by so doing, you would have to resign Bohun Court to Sir Guy, as well as refund the large sums expended during the last eighteen months, not to mention having to make good the timber cut down, on which Sir Guy set a store which no money could pay.”

Euphemia leant her head in her hands. She was on the rack, but the torture must be endured. She felt she was in this woman’s power, and only waited to see the full extent of it.



"I, on the contrary," pursued Ponsford, "lose but little, *comparatively*. I lose the legacy your ladyship calls munificent, but I lose no position or character in the eyes of the world—that loss unhappily would be your ladyship's—supposing, I mean, that by declining to agree to my terms, you compel me to resort to the extreme measure of swearing to the existence of the codicil, at present mislaid."

"Mislaid?" cried Euphemia, looking up, her cheeks burning, and eyes flashing, "*lost*, you mean! if, indeed, it ever existed, which I doubt."

"To that, also, I can swear," continued her tormentor, "and should circumstances compel me, I should use my best endeavours to find it. Hitherto, *for your ladyship's sake*, I have been perfectly passive, yet I *might* have found it—I may still; as to its existence, I saw it with my own eyes, and read every word of it whilst your ladyship slept on the sofa in the room adjoining that of Sir Felix, and Mr. Bohun slept soundly by his brother's side."

"Woman!" cried Euphemia, in a burst of uncontrollable passion, "what did you do with it? Why did you not say this before? Do you see into what depths of infamy you have drawn me?"

"To your first question, my lady, I answer, that I replaced it in its hiding-place. To your second, I

was silent *for your sake*. I could not bring myself to expose, before so many eyes, the employer upon whose bread I was subsisting.....”

“Fiend!” muttered Euphemia between her teeth, but Ponsford appeared not to hear the ejaculation. “To expose, indeed!” she cried aloud, “do you imagine that whilst exposing (as you call it) *my* doings, you yourself would have come off blameless?”

“Madam, the world would have judged between us. What do I lose if I am the means of setting aside this will?—*one* hundred a year! What do *you* lose?—everything, madam! Not only Bohun Court and its princely dowry, but something that the neighbourhood will not try to save for you—*your good name*.”

Euphemia held her temples between her hands, and pressed them tightly. Every vein seemed bursting.

“And now, madam,” said Ponsford, with perfect composure, regardless of the state into which her insolent reproaches and insinuations had thrown her mistress, “I think you will agree with me, that we understand each other. Your ladyship must see that by permitting me to retire from your service upon an annuity of two hundred a year, you remain undisputed owner of this property, and

the means whereby it was obtained will be a secret for ever between us.....”

Euphemia set her teeth—almost ground them together in her anguish.

“.....if, on the contrary, you decline this arrangement, it is a duty I owe to myself to set seriously to work to find that lost codicil..... hitherto, I have but put impediments in the way.....”

“Ponsford!” cried Euphemia, “what would I give to expose you? I have a great mind to do it!”

“Sadly against your own interests if you did, my lady,” retorted Ponsford, with a smile.

“What did you do with it?” repeated Lady Bohun, wildly, “what has become of it?”

“That is a question I cannot answer,” said Ponsford, evasively; “suffice it to say, *it did exist*—circumstances may bring it to light again; should such ever happen.....*Lady Bohun*,” she continued, emphatically, “*it will be your ruin!* so think over my terms. If you agree to them, I quit your service; if you decline, I remain at Bohun Court. Really, I do not much care which it is.”

But Euphemia had now borne as much as she could. She started to her feet.

“Leave me,” she exclaimed, pointing to the

door, with a gesture of scornful command, yet with a dignity which apparently awed for a moment the contemptuous menial, "leave this room. When I have decided, I shall inform you. Until then, intrude yourself no more into my presence. Not a syllable more, if you please, but leave the room."

CHAPTER XIII.

ORDERED out of the room!—for the first time in her life, dismissed ignominiously and with the air of an empress, from the presence of a spirit even more dauntless than her own. Ponsford thought she had only to deal with a vixen. She found there was as much tigress as vixen in that spoiled and petted nature, and she felt her own temperate blood boil at the insult she had received.

“But she is in my power—yes, in my power, and knows it too! so, though she may try to humble, she can never crush me. She must fall herself in dragging *me* down!” and the indignant woman hurried along the passages to her own apartments, and locked herself into her room.

Could she have looked behind the panels of the room she had lately left, and seen Lady Bohun stretched on the bed in an agony of remorse, anguish, and humiliation defying control, she would

perhaps have been satisfied with what she had done. But as long as the scene was being enacted, Euphemia had borne up. The wily Ponsford had seen that she had had power to agitate her mistress, but of the extent of that agitation she had not an idea. Euphemia, in the woman's presence, had mastered herself, had held her ground proudly to the last moment ; but no sooner was she relieved of that presence, than the overcharged heart broke down, and she flung herself on her bed in all the abandonment of an anguish which must be locked in her own bosom, and borne by herself alone. It was as Ponsford had justly remarked, with humiliating and degrading familiarity, "a secret between them for ever."

"Oh! father, father!" sobbed the lady of Bohun Court, "if I did but dare to tell you! if I could but crawl to your feet and tell you what I have done, and what that wretched woman has done, and if I had but courage to say, publish all, only rid me of her presence, I should be happy! but I dare not—it would kill the poor old man. He would never believe that I never knew of the positive execution and existence of that lost codicil till this day, and the dishonour would kill him. Besides, it is too late. She holds me fast—she may betray me at any moment, whilst I.....I have no

alternative but to buy both her silence and her absence !”

That day Lady Bohun had to sit at the head of her brilliant table, and feel the guilty usurper that she was, and smile at the sallies of her buoyant intended whilst her heart was bursting, breaking, within her.

Mrs. Blackstone was growing old and obtuse, but Mr. Blackstone's eyes were keen, and he saw the trouble on his daughter's brow, and the tears swimming in her eyes, and his affection took alarm.

“ Phemy, my darling,” said the old man, as he made her sit down in a low chair by his side after dinner, “you don't seem in good spirits. Is anything going wrong? tell your old father, my dear, and perhaps I can get you out of it whatever it is.”

But she denied the charge, for what else could she do ?—tried, too, to laugh, whilst she denied it.

“ I feel dull, very naturally, papa, for you know I am taking a very serious step.”

“ Yes, my dear, very serious ; but not taken, I hope, without due deliberation. Still it is a serious step for one placed on such an eminence of prosperity as yourself”—(Euphemia winced)—“and

you may well feel a little subdued, for husbands are husbands, be the wives ever so independent."

"Ah! papa, independence is a blessed thing."

"Nonsense, my dear. It is too late for you to say that; besides, I have a very good opinion of Sydney, though, begging your pardon, my dear, I cannot call him the wisest man that ever lived. But now that we are having a cozy chat, for I see your mother is fast asleep, and Sydney has taken to his eternal pipe (which I would annihilate if I were you), I want to ask you a question. My dear, you have got a new maid, I see—a young one, with a sort of lace d'oyley on the top of her head....."

"Oh! papa, how absurd. Yes, Estelle."

"Then, let me ask, are you going to part with that great lady who has been with you since..... since....."

"Since I became Lady Bohun? Yes, papa, she is to go."

"I am glad to hear it—I am very glad to hear it," exclaimed the old man, energetically, "and I tell you why, my dear; I think she assumes, and presumes; you have done very wisely; you gave *her* warning, of course?"

Euphemia hesitated.

"It has been a sort of mutual arrangement and understanding more than a warning," said she.

"But still clearly understood I hope, my dear?"

"Oh! yes, papa. I shall make her understand, only I thought of not speaking till just as I was going away."

"And leaving her in the house with us?"

"Would it be unpleasant for you, papa?"

"My dear, I dislike that woman exceedingly..."

("Oh! clearsighted and rightly judging!" thought Euphemia, as she sighed bitterly; but her father, mistaking the reason of the sigh, hastily corrected himself.)

"Not that I have any right, dear child, to set up a personal prejudice against any servant for whom, from long habit, you may entertain a regard....."

Euphemia raised her hands and eyes involuntarily with a gesture which was lost upon Mr. Blackstone, so he continued innocently,

"But, at the same time, if it could be arranged otherwise.....your mother and I were saying the other day that if you really wanted a good, useful housekeeper, there is our own Mrs. Landon, who thinks of coming back to service; her shop never answered; she would just suit you....."

"Papa, I should be rejoiced to have her," ex-

claimed Euphemia, starting up. Then, as if suddenly recollecting herself, "but, perhaps, I had better be sure of Ponsford's going first."

"My dear!" said her father, with some surprise, "surely that rests entirely with you?"

Euphemia's only answer was, laying her head on her father's lap.

"My child," said he, seriously, "I once had a favourite old story.....my Phemy always laughed at that old story.....but it was one most painfully true, and one which need not be confined to *my* family only; it might be told of any in the land; but you remember how it testified to much misery caused by the tyranny of a servant. God grant, my Phemy, you may never know this tyranny; but that also rests with you entirely. With proper energy and self-respect you could never be under any such dominion. Let me exhort you to exert both in the present case. Have you given this person the choice either to go or to remain?"

"I.....I don't think so, papa," stammered Euphemia.

"You don't think, my dear? Do you mean, that it actually rests with *her*?"

"Papa.....I am to have a final interview on the subject."

Mr. Blackstone was puzzled, and not quite satisfied.

"Phemy," said he, "if you wish her to go, tell her so, plainly. If you wish her to stay, you may perhaps be obliged to give her the option. That is *my* view. I see no other course."

It was Lady Bohun's view, too, and most heartily did she wish she could take that course, but, alas! her vision was not straightforward and simple like that of her father. Before *her* sad eyes were two courses. She was in that woman's power. The choice lay with *her*, yet this was part of the bitter secret; such a state of thralldom could not be told, particularly to that old man, whose dread of such a thing was so great that, had he suspected it, he would instantly have exerted his parental authority, and wrested his daughter from her humiliating position.

Euphemia knew this well, and knew also all the ruin such an explosion would entail: ruin, not only of her prospects, but, as Ponsford had truly said, of her good name. Besides, the just scorn of an indignant world would kill that old man, who had all his life been reckoned the very soul of honour. The story would soon get about, and the part Euphemia had played would be much more con-

spicuously shown forth than the subordinate machinations of her confidential servant.

"Better die," said she to herself, with a recklessness bordering on despair, "better die than be betrayed! yet it is not I who am so guilty; it is that woman; but she will make it appear my deed; and I shall have no redress—no witnesses; I shall stand before the world a dishonoured creature! No; death would be preferable. I must live and endure it."

"Papa," said she, aloud, "I must just think it over to-night, and to-morrow I will make up my mind. She is very useful, and so, of course, I feel a reluctance.....but still.....I hope I am quite capable of keeping my own ground if she turns restive, so do not fear for me. Only give me time."

And time she took, for the day before the wedding arrived, and yet that final interview had been postponed from hour to hour—indeed, she and Mrs. Ponsford had not met in private since the memorable evening. Lady Bohun had begged her mother to share her room with her, and the general orders relative to the affairs of the house were given in her mother's presence.

Ponsford saw it all, and smiled in her heart. She did not regard it as a token of profound displea-

sure, but rather as a symptom of moral cowardice, and, instead of offending, it flattered her.

However, Lady Bohun knew that the moment must come, though she might push it off to the last, and she also knew that that dreaded and terrific interview must take place alone; therefore, on that last evening, a few minutes before it was time to summon Estelle to dress her for dinner, she rang the bell which was considered Ponsford's bell, and, with the cheque for two hundred pounds before her, awaited her arrival.

That those moments seemed hours, any one can readily believe. When a feud takes place between two who have been fast friends, how much more of rancour and bitterness there is than between those who never felt a spark of love for each other. When old enemies quarrel, the chances are they will make it up again; but when friends fall out, the bitterness is undying. They know each other's secrets, and each other's weak points; so they possess an advantage which enemies never can attain—the delicious advantage of using these secrets and weak points, as weapons.

Better trust to the tender mercies of an enemy, than to those of a friend who has ever turned against you.

So, with unutterable bitterness, and a sort of

haughty, sullen disgust, Lady Bohun waited for the dependant who had shared her confidence, and possessed herself of her very thoughts for so long.

"How will she dare meet my gaze?" thought Euphemia, and at that moment, the door opening, she raised her eyes fearlessly to the level of Ponsford's face.

The woman's countenance was unmoved. Pale, still, not a line, not a shadow, not a tint to betoken agitation; it seemed to gleam down in its whiteness like ice upon the rich warmth of Lady Bohun's complexion, heightened as it now was by the trial she had to go through.

And, with her usual stately ease, she advanced to the respectful distance at which she generally stood to receive Lady Bohun's orders.

"I have sent for you," began Euphemia, very slowly, looking her full in the face, but not calling her by name, "to tell you that I have made my decision on the point we were discussing the other day. The fewer words that pass between us now, the better. I wish merely to tell you that I agree to give you the two hundred a year required by you, on condition that you leave my house, and this cheque will pay the first year in advance. Messrs. Deedes and Grim, being now beneath this roof, will draw up the necessary documents securing

this sum to you for the term of your life, to-night; and all I have further to remark is, that the sooner you quit Bohun Court after what has occurred, the better it will be."

With a slight wave of her hand, in dismissal, Euphemia now turned away, expecting to hear the footsteps retreat, and the door close upon that now hated form—but no; Ponsford never stirred; a moment's pause, and her calm, precise voice broke the silence.

"I have to thank your ladyship," said she, "for the choice you have given me. I look upon it as a choice, because I know that your ladyship grants the annuity reluctantly, and feels—as I do myself—that in the eyes of Messrs. Deedes and Grim, the arrangement will have a very singular appearance. In the more suspicious eyes of Messrs. Bland and Frumpton, who will no doubt hear of it, it will look what it is, a *compromise*, and I believe your ladyship will agree that this is an injurious light for either of us to appear in, where money matters are concerned. I have thought it well over, and have been for some days prepared with my answer. I gratefully decline the two hundred a year for the present"—a marked emphasis—"and will, therefore, if you please, remain at Bohun Court."

Utter amazement, almost amounting to dismay,

deprived Lady Bohun of the power of speaking for the first few seconds, but, quicker than lightning in that brief space of time, ideas had rushed through her mind—floods of ideas, which it would take long to write, and long to read, yet all passing through the brain with that wondrous rapidity which is the faculty of thought. But these ideas *might* be embodied in words; they *were* words in her own full heart.

“Will she not go?” thought Lady Bohun “can I not compel her? does she mean to stand holding the sword over my head? shall I betray her? shall I throw the game up, and say at once produce the hidden codicil, do your worst, and set me free? What should I lose by it?—Bohun Court! Yes, it would be *his*, then; but my jointure would be ample.....Should I lose nothing else?—Yes; she would say I had been an accessory in the concealment. So I have, *for one week*; so my good name, as she justly said, would be the second loss. Good heavens! *that* is lost already! And I should have to stoop to Sir Guy Bohun! to be despised object in his eyes! no, no, no—that could not bear! But what shall I gain if I let her stay on her own terms?—Bohun Court—Sydney reckons on Bohun Court—I shall gain it, and retain

my position. Now Heaven help me, for I must answer her !”

During this mental soliloquy, so rapidly held, her eyes had seemed to measure Ponsford from head to foot. The woman did not return the gaze, but she did not seem abashed by it.

“Do I understand you rightly?” were Lady Bohun’s first words. They were more to gain time than in the light of a question.

“I hope so, my lady,” was the reply ; “and I believe I have acted for the best, even for your ladyship. With the lawyers and all your ladyship’s wedding guests in the house, on the very eve of your marriage, I do not see how any other arrangement could possibly be made. Should you decline my terms, in all probability the wedding will not take place to-morrow. I shall consider it my duty to.....”

“To be silent, if you please,” interrupted Lady Bohun, her eyes flashing. “Until I *do* decline your terms, I shall thank you to favour me with none of your remarks, but to recollect, that whilst under my roof, *you are my servant*, and I shall exact from you the respect and obedience which a servant is required to give. I pay for it, Ponsford—I shall exact it ! When I cease to pay for it, you are no longer bound to give it. When I

decline your terms, you may take your own measures ; so long as I accede to them, I hold you to your duties ! *Now* I hope you understand *me*."

And with the imperious fury which Ponsford had never till now seen directed against herself, Lady Bohun rose from her seat and pointed to the door.

Surprised for the moment out of her usual self-command, Ponsford obeyed the haughty gesture as if mechanically, and Euphemia resumed her seat, breathless.

"I have cowed her!" were the first expressive words that burst from a heart beating to suffocation. "I have frightened her, but she will recover ; she will soon see that it is *I* who should shrink, not she, wretched woman ! and then she will return to the attack. My triumph is empty, evanescent, absurd ! when my fate is in her hands. What did she say about the wedding not taking place to-morrow ?—could she stop it ? Yes, if she holds that codicil, she could. If I betray her, I can indict her for felony ; but I betray myself, too, by betraying her.....no.....things must rest as they are. I cannot do it ! She must go on, triumphing, but she shall think I do not see her triumph. She shall think I believe but in my own !"

Lady Bohun's dinner-table that day was laid for twenty-four. In half an hour from the time of

this scene she was seated at the head of it, magnificently dressed, laughing and talking as gaily as the gayest there. Ponsford had been right when she said, "If you decline my terms, in all probability the wedding will not take place to-morrow." Such a scandal, with the house full of the wedding-guests, would have been impossible. *Any* terms might have been made under such circumstances! The vampire had chosen her moment well.

In the giddy excitement of that gay evening, Ponsford might be forgotten; but in the silent, quiet hours of the night, when Euphemia looked back upon the events of the day, the full horror of her position came before her, and she shuddered as she thought to herself, "How long shall I have to endure this life? how long shall I live under the same roof with one with whom I am on such miserable terms? how long will she compel me to meet her cold white face at every turn, and try to shun her hateful presence? And yet people call me on the pinnacle of happiness and prosperity! Yes, so I am—but with a skeleton in my cupboard!"

CHAPTER XIV.

AND now we must pass over a year. It may sound but a short time, but where every month, and week, and day of it has had its stirring events and startling scenes, it seems a long time to the chief actors in life's weary drama.

We need not follow the newly-wedded pair in their wanderings, but we must come back with them to Bohun Court. They are married people now of twelve months' standing; they return to that beautiful home mutually disenchanted, like many and many a "happy couple" before them.

They started under, apparently, the very brightest of auspices; everybody said what a well-matched couple, what a handsome pair, what a lucky man! Yes, it all seemed very dazzling and very happy; but each of them carried away in their own bosoms their skeletons, and they brought them back again to Bohun Court—two now, instead of one.

Lady Bohun sits in her own morning room, at a table covered with papers, in an attitude more expressive than graceful; her elbows are on the table, and her hands, pushing back her hair, are clasped over her forehead. With the slight, arched brows firmly knit, and the full, curved lips compressed into a look of desperate determination, she sits watching, with the eye of a lynx, the gray-haired man before her, on whose venerable face is seen only an expression of deep grief.

It is her father. He is plunging into a perfect abyss of accounts, and the long dormant genius of the man of business shines out now in bright and bold relief, though the task is driving a dagger into his heart.

And at last it seemed even to puzzle *him*.

"My Phemy, it exceeds even my utmost expectations; you must look the evil boldly in the face, for you have much to endure."

"I am quite prepared, papa," said Lady Bohun, not in soft tones, but in a voice of stern displeasure. There was no softness about her now. She sat there feeling that she was an injured, and, worse than that, a deceived woman. She sat there writhing under a woman's most bitter trial—that of knowing that she had married for love, and had

been married herself for money! "I am quite prepared for *anything*."

"Then, my child, you knew when you married that Sydney had debts?"

"Yes, I own I did; but who could ever have dreamed, that with a fortune like mine, I could not, with a stroke of my pen, have extricated him from them?"

"It would have been wiser, my child, to have given me a hint, that I might have looked into matters a little. Of course, I knew that Sydney had always been extravagant....."

"I wish I could put his extravagance into the past tense, papa," said Euphemia, bitterly; "what has he done for the last year but spend, spend, spend? And now, for the first time in my life, I feel that I actually dare not draw a cheque, so enormously is my account overdrawn. Good heavens! dearest father," she exclaimed, clasping her hands with sudden energy, "what an idiot I have been! I thought that by reserving to myself the power of drawing my own cheques, I should escape half the miseries and humiliations of other married women; and what have I gained by it? nothing! I have drawn the cheques, it is true, but not for myself! I have drained the exchequer"—a laugh of sarcastic anguish—"and derived no

benefit from it ! But I should not complain, could I but have cleared *him*, and that, you say, is impossible ?”

“My dearest, had it been only Sydney’s *debts*, we could have kept our heads above water well, for with such an income and estate as yours”.....a smothered groan.....“there are myriads of ways and means of raising money ; but, my child, it is not his debts at which I tremble, it is his liabilities.”

“And what may they amount to ?” asked the young wife, in blissful ignorance of such calamities, yet sufficiently sensible that they were something dangerous, and consequently putting the question in a sort of concentrated voice, as if to say, tell me the worst at once.

Mr. Blackstone looked up in some surprise at the question.

“My dear,” was his answer, “liabilities mean indefinite sums—sums, of which the amount *may* be incalculable !”

Lady Bohun clasped her hands together.

“But to proceed to business,” continued her father : “the first point to be considered is, how the debts can be liquidated. I do not wish to add to the pain you are suffering, Phemy, but it certainly does seem surprising to me that, reserving as you did the right of drawing your own income,

and paying Sydney a certain yearly sum, you could not manage to hold him a little more in check."

"I should like to know," cried his daughter, with a burst of indignant bitterness, "what sort of a life the wife would lead who ever dared to refuse her husband money! Oh! papa, you know the world too well to think (as I did, like a poor weak fool as I was!) that the mere fact of my being able to prevent his signing his name to draw money, would ensure the safety of that money. Good Heavens! I had better have been a labourer's wife, earning his daily bread and weekly shillings, than the wretch I am, dreading the return of every morning's sun!"

"My Phemy," said her father, gently, "there is nothing for you to dread....."

"A.....h!" groaned Lady Bohun.

".....Even if it came to the worst, as long as your mother and I live, you are safe as far as home and protection goes. But, now, to look things seriously in the face, I fear I must catalogue Sydney's offences....."

"Do, do! nothing will surprise me."

"He has put his name to bills—that I know. By this act alone, he stands upon a volcano. Next, he....."

"Why enumerate his deeds?" interrupted Lady Bohun, with vehemence, "will it help the matter at all?"

"No—I cannot say it will, unless by preparing you....."

"I am prepared already, for anything! everything! all I want to know is, can he avoid arrest?"

"Certainly, if....."

"If what? if he flies his country?"

"I hope it has not come to that yet."

"Oh! papa, hope nothing!" and again Lady Bohun laughed sarcastically. "I have hoped till I have wearied of hoping. It is the happy who hope—not I! oh! not I!"

And she hid her face in her hands, and her thoughts travelled back to those bright bygone days of real peace, happiness, and prosperity, when even her brilliant lot did not seem to satisfy her; and all her wealth and luxury did not suffice to expel from that lovely home of hers the skeleton which her imagination saw in it.

Oh! could those days but come again! Alas! and alas! What would she now have given to be once more Sir Felix Bohun's honoured, petted wife, or Mr. Blackstone's envied daughter!

"It is my day of retribution," said she, to herself, "and God only knows how much more I may

have to suffer. My punishment is severe, but it is just. I deserve it all, and more. Let me, then, meet it boldly.—Papa,” she continued aloud, “ought not Sydney to be present during this investigation?”

“Certainly, my dear, certainly, if you can prevail upon him.”

“If? Why should he refuse?”

“Well, my dear, try.”

The old man spoke very calmly, but Lady Bohun left the room in a fever of agitation.

“Not come and help us when we are taking all this trouble for *him*?” thought she, as she hurried to his room; “surely he has not the effrontery to refuse?”

And she almost burst open the door of the room he had appropriated to himself. Through an atmosphere as dense with smoke as any London fog, the refined and once-fastidious Lady Bohun discerned her husband.

(Time was—and her heart often reminded her of it—when Mr. Bohun was not allowed to pass through the conservatory with a cigarette in his hand, whilst now Captain Sydney Aylmer wandered through all the costly rooms of Bohun Court smoking a cigar four inches long, and the thickness of a walking-stick, unreprieved!)

"Sydney," exclaimed his wife, impetuously, "my father wishes to know if you are coming to assist us in our most unpalatable task this morning? We have been wading through all the bills, and arranging them....."

"The deuce you have—thank you; preparatory to paying them, I hope," was the cool reply, a puff of smoke issuing from his lips between every sentence.

"I should have thought," was the retort, "that even you would hardly have the face to ask me to do more than I have done!"

"Even I? Am I so very bad! Well, it can't be helped. You took me for better for worse, so you have no right to complain if you find it is for the latter. You ladies sometimes make bad bargains."

"I do not come here to listen to your ill-timed jokes," cried Lady Bohun, contemptuously; "but to require your presence in the library, where my father has been hard at work in your service ever since breakfast."

"I never asked him to trouble himself, Phemy."

"Then, who is to do it? Are we to plunge deeper and deeper into the abyss, and not make a single effort to save ourselves? *You* will not exert

yourself, so my father is obliged to do it. He will not see my fortune squandered without, at least, attempting to save me from poverty."

"Squandered? now, I call that good. I think, considering that you can have very few expences compared to mine, you have spent a pretty penny yourself this year. Considering that I allow you four hundred a year for your dress....."

"*You* allow me?" cried Lady Bohun, "*you?* when every farthing is mine?"

"My Lady Bohun, a married woman's money is her husband's. Don't you irritate me, nor interrupt me. I say, you need not talk of my extravagance, when you have spent such sums this year yourself, in a manner totally incomprehensible to me....."

"Sydney," said Euphemia, turning very pale, "I told you when we married that I would have no inquiring into the manner in which I spent my money, neither would I render any account to you for the sums I drew."

"Perhaps so, and if you had drawn a few hundreds more than your allowance....."

"My allowance? Good Heavens !....."

"I might have overlooked it; but, my fair Phemy, whilst you have been busying yourself

with *my* money matters, I have interested myself in yours, and, for the life of me, I cannot make out what you do with a two hundred pounds which you seem to take regularly every quarter over and above your pinmoney."

Lady Bohun's face, which had been gradually growing paler and paler, now became quite ashen in its hue; she clenched her hands on the back of the chair over which she was leaning, and replied, in a low, desperate sort of voice,

"Sydney, when I get into debt—when I bet, and gamble, and put my name to bills, and scatter a noble fortune to the winds—speak as you have now spoken, not till then. You have no right to question the manner in which I spend my income. Even if you had, your conduct, your reckless extravagance, your guilty folly, and your heartless indifference, would be sufficient to rouse me to rebellion. As it is, I deny your right. And now, back to your own wretched affairs. Are you coming to the library?"

"No, I am not; there!"

"You will not assist my father? Do you know that he is working in the dark? How can he help you if you will not give him a clear and a *true* statement as to what you really do owe?"

"I don't know myself, so how can I enlighten him?"

"You must know to a certain extent. Besides, he wishes to save you the humiliation of making these horrid revelations before Messrs. Deedes and Grim, whom we expect by every train."

"Deedes is a brute, and Grim is a fool, and you may tell them so from me."

"They are so accustomed to hear you call all our country neighbours by those names, that I fear they will not feel their force. However, they come here as necessary evils, and may be of great use, at all events, to *me*, if not to you, so I intend to be civil to them....."

At this moment, the sonorous bell of Bohun Court resounded through the hall.

"They are here," said Lady Bohun, trembling with agitation, and deadly pale.

"Give me a light," said Captain Sydney Aylmer; "I shall have one more cigar, and then, perhaps I may come."

Lady Bohun turned and left the room with a chill at her heart, the chill of wounded affection—for she had really cared for her cousin Sydney—and the chill of impending misfortune. She could not realize pecuniary difficulties, yet she felt a sort

of foreshadowing of what they might be. She felt now, for the first time, that loss of money would bring destruction upon her. Without a golden key, how could she lock the cupboard that contained the skeleton that haunted her?

CHAPTER XV.

THAT whole day, Messrs. Deedes and Grim were shut up in the library with Mr. Blackstone. Lady Bohun could not be persuaded to join them; she said she was ill, and her father did not urge it, since one glance at her countenance could tell him that the illness was not feigned. Euphemia, generally so tenacious upon matters of business, shrank from the present inquiry with perfect horror, for the effect of the shock upon her health had been so great that she really was ill.

"Only tell me," said she to her father, "what there will be left for me to live upon, and I care to know no more. Sydney has injured me so deeply by his deceitful conduct, that if it is better we should part.....be it so.....only let me know what I have left, and let it be certain; he must not be able to touch my income again. Any sum that you may rescue must be secured to my sole and

separate use ; otherwise, in five years I shall be a beggar."

And so Messrs. Deedes and Grim, and Blackstone pored over all the letters, all the papers, and all the bills belonging to Captain Sydney Aylmer which could in any way throw light upon his circumstances. There was no difficulty in accounting for the position in which they now found him with regard to money matters, for half an hour's examination enabled them to ascertain that within three months after his marriage he had paid debts to the amount of eighteen thousand pounds.

"How could you let him have such a sum without a word of inquiry?" Mr. Blackstone had asked his daughter.

"I did not know it," said she.

"Not when you drew all the cheques yourself."

"I signed my name to blank cheques, and he filled in the amount himself. I trusted to his honour not to take more than he really wanted, —never to overdraw our account—this is my reward! I knew he had debts when we married. I little dreamt he was on the verge of ruin! Had I ever refused him money, my life would have been made intolerable to me."

And a burst of tears, tears of wounded pride and

bitter disappointment, streamed from those eyes to which such tears were sadly strange.

But the great difficulty with which Messrs. Deedes and Grim had to contend was the impossibility of coming to a right conclusion as to the gallant captain's liabilities.

"We know pretty well what he has spent, and what his outstanding debts are," said they to Mr. Blackstone; "but we much fear there is worse behind the curtain. We really think the best plan would be for Captain Aylmer to go out of the way just for the present, for fear of accidents, and then our duty must be to raise money upon the estate."

This suggestion was accordingly imparted at once both to Lady Bohun and her husband. As for Captain Aylmer, he was passive. As long as he had his cigars, his valet, his dressing-case, and his new gloves every day, it was utterly indifferent to him where he was. But when it came to the question of raising money on the estate, Lady Bohun stood firm. With a blanched cheek and quivering lips she vehemently and absolutely refused to allow any such plan to be put into execution. In vain even her father urged that he saw no objection to it. *She* saw an objection. *She* knew well enough what only one other in the world knew; that money *must not* be raised on Bohun

Court. Suppose that dreadful secret ever to ooze out (and it was in the keeping of a woman *not to be trusted*), who was to refund that raised money?

"No, papa, take any measures you please but that, for Bohun Court *must not* be touched."

"Only money raised on it, Phemy?"

"To be repaid—how?"

"By saving, by great care and economy."

Lady Bohun laughed bitterly.

"Care and economy where Sydney is concerned?"

"Then, my dear, there is but one other alternative. Sydney must fly."

"Let him!" exclaimed the indignant wife; "what better could he do? but not a finger shall be laid on Bohun Court. Look!" she added, walking to the window and pointing to the thinned plantations; "look at all that timber cut down to pay his way through this frightful year! How are those glorious trees ever to be replaced?"

"My dearest," said Mr. Blackstone, mildly; "fortunately, there is no positive necessity for your replacing them at all. You have robbed only yourself."

The remark, uttered in such pure ignorance, went like a dagger to that heart so full of conscious guilt, and with feelings of humiliation and degradation which seemed to bow her young head

to the very dust, Lady Bohun turned and left the room, giving her poor old father only the idea that she could bear no more.

She shut herself up in her own boudoir, and spent that evening alone with her mother, Mr. Blackstone coming in and out occasionally to report the progress of the lawyers, and to share the light repast which was all those heavy spirits cared to taste.

Messrs. Deedes and Grim also dined alone, but they sat in state in the great dining-room. To them, the first salmon, the early cucumbers, the diminutive lamb, forced peas, and precocious potatoes had charms which gladdened their hearts, laden, not with griefs, but with most lucrative business and profitable cares.

As for Captain Sydney Aylmer, he took good care to have all his usual creature comforts dispensed to him, but even *he* had not the face to discuss them in company, so he prudently kept to his own den, with the pleasant reflection that all these mysterious proceedings were being enacted on his account, and that it was his own reckless extravagance that had disturbed the machinery of that once regular establishment.

But Messrs. Deedes and Grim spent a very pleasant time of it. The champagne and the

claret of Bohun Court were proverbial, and their spirits rejoiced as they filled and refilled their glasses. Mr. Grim grew jovial over it.

"I have often heard," said he, when the servants had left the room, "of ducks and drakes being made of a fine property, but I never saw a clearer instance of it than the present,"

Mr. Deedes agreed. It was very lamentable he said, but what he considered more lamentable still, was the change in Lady Bohun. Bad as the case was, he could not see sufficient cause for such intense misery as it appeared to inflict upon her.

"She looks as if she had had her death-blow. What a wreck! Bless my soul, what a wreck in one short year! How well I remember her on the occasion of the death of Sir Felix, just two years ago now; what a fine, handsome, spirited young woman she was, and how grandly she stood up in defiance before Sir Guy Bohun, when there was that doubt about the will, and that codicil, you know....."

"Queer business that; queer story," said Mr. Deedes, *sotto voce*. "We came out better than I expected in that."

"She is not the same creature now," was Mr. Grim's rejoinder, and this was true enough. Could any one have entered her dressing-room that night

and seen her sitting, her long hair dishevelled, her cheeks pale and sunk, and her eyes fixed on vacancy, they would have asked, what dark shadow has passed over that young spirit? what weight is hanging over that troubled brow? Lady Bohun is not indeed the same creature now, not even in courage; for troubles and trials break down nerves which once seemed made of iron, and at every slightest noise that echoed through the large, silent house, she started visibly.

She sat there alone, waiting for her mother. The lawyers had returned to their labours again after dinner, and Mrs. Blackstone had promised to look in and tell her their final resolutions as she went up to bed, for they were to depart by an early train the following morning, if they could get through their business that night.

Singularly enough, the flood of misery now pouring in upon her heart, seemed quite to have swallowed up, for the time being, the one great misery of her life. She had groaned beneath a secret tyranny for many years—she was now the victim of an open one. She had lived for many months with a constant dread gnawing and gnawing at her peace—the dread of detection—and now she sat in terror at the prospect of poverty opening before her—poverty and pecuniary disgrace; she would be

pointed at now as the wife of the man who had been obliged to fly his country for debt !

She fancied that what she was now suffering was harder to bear than anything she had yet suffered. It was, in fact, one misery swallowing up another, and the last seemed, of course, the greatest, because one was dormant (though it required money to keep it so), and the other was active—this, too, requiring money, but *that* the lawyers must settle.

“ If they cannot,” was her bitter *refrain*, “ let him fly. He could not do better.”

She bent herself double, and, with her face hidden in her hands, Lady Bohun rocked herself backwards and forwards in the abandonment of her anguish and indignation.

She wondered what her servants would think of all that was going on ? of the arrival of the lawyers ? of their dining alone in state in the dining-room, whilst she, and her father and mother, were ensconced in their private apartments, and Captain Sydney Aylmer in his ? She was obliged to descend to all these small mundane reflections, for the romance of her life was over. What would her servants think of all this ? *They* would be the first people to suspect that something was wrong—not the neighbourhood—it would be some time before the neighbourhood took alarm, and when they did,

it would be on a grander scale, as it were ; it is less humiliating to be degraded in the eyes of the world at large, than in the sight of one's immediate dependants—people who are busying themselves around you, and watching you, from morning till night. It is difficult to play the heroine to *these*.

Suddenly, as she sat brooding, and reflecting, and listening, there fell upon her ear a step approaching along the passage leading from the main corridor to Lady Bohun's room—a step that made her heart beat to suffocation. It was not her mother's ; it was a step she had not heard there for many months—it was one which had not dared, for all those months, by tacit agreement, to venture near her door—for a barrier had, by degrees, sprung up between the owner of that footstep and Lady Bohun.

Ponsford was no longer housekeeper. Lady Bohun had now a professed cook, to suit the taste of Captain Aylmer, and she was much too fine a lady to submit to a housekeeper, so Ponsford merely resided at Bohun Court, in what capacity nobody knew. Everybody saw that there was something mysterious in her residence there, but reckoning her as a servant like themselves, the other servants (with the *esprit de corps* which always animates that worthy class) forbore to make

any remarks on the subject, and only concluded that she had her own reasons, eligible and good, no doubt, for staying—otherwise she would go.

There was only one circumstance that at all attracted remark, and that was that any communication that took place between Lady Bohun and Mrs. Ponsford was always held in writing. Notes often passed between them ; words, *never*.

And now that well-known step approached the door. That it should venture to do so, made Lady Bohun's hasty and passionate blood boil again. But there it came, advancing in its light, measured tread, and then came the short, sharp knock.

To the vampire, Lady Bohun still held herself a heroine. With the same air of imperious command, which sat so well on her in former days, she now turned herself round to meet that woman face to face once more, and to ask her, by that mute gesture, the purport of her intrusion. Any one else would have been daunted. Not so Mrs. Ponsford.

Lady Bohun knew that had not Ponsford some serious reason for seeking a personal interview, she would not have braved one.

“She knows I am in her power—she knows that she may exasperate and insult me with impunity—but she knows, too, that however far she

may presume, *I am her match*, so now.....let her speak first.....it must be something vital."

These thoughts seemed to shine through Lady Bohun's eyes. They flashed with a sort of fierce inquiring glance, and the marble image-like countenance before her met the burning gaze with one as fixed, as calm, as cold, as ice.

"I come, madam"—the voice sounded like what one might suppose a spirit's might sound, so clear and low—"I come to inform you that it is my intention to leave Bohun Court."

Lady Bohun bent her head with the slightest possible inclination.

"If your ladyship recollects," she continued, "you gave me leave to do so last year, but it so happened that at that moment it did not suit my plans. Now, however, it does, and I have waited on your ladyship, to take my leave in the first place, and in the next to say, that as Messrs. Deedes and Grim are in the house, it may possibly be as well that they should put, in formal words, the terms on which I *do* leave you. There is nothing like black and white in such matters," she added, meaningly.

Lady Bohun held her breath for a moment, with tightened lips. Was this to be borne? was such cool insolence to be tolerated? and these terms to

be acceded to, without one effort to oppose such tyranny?—No!

“Ponsford,” said she, glaring at her, “a year ago, you say I gave you leave to go—it was no such thing—I *desired you to quit* Bohun Court, and my words were, *the sooner the better*. I desired you to go, on your own terms, and you refused—consequently, the treaty, the compact, or whatever name it may bear, falls null and void to the ground. I do not now forbid you to leave the house—on the contrary, I say again *go*, but *this* time you go on *my* terms—empty handed!”

Ponsford looked firmly in her mistress’s face.

“Your ladyship is in earnest? You positively decline to allow me the two hundred a year you promised me?”

“I promised it under very different circumstances; you refused it, and the promise was absolved; it is now no longer in my power to renew it.”

“I thought as much,” said the vampire, with a smile; “I was quite prepared for it; but unfortunately I must live, like all the rest of the world.”

“Live?” cried Lady Bohun, “have you not made enough by me to live for *years and years*? Have you not been absolutely living on me ever

since you and I first met, and how much money have you had from me *this year alone?*”

“I have not counted,” was the calm reply.

“But *I* have,” exclaimed Lady Bohun, “and the sum amounts to *eight hundred pounds!* Have you the face, after receiving so unprecedented a sum, to ask me for more? *Me*, a married woman? whose husband must, of course, be partially cognisant of her expenditure? Have you the effrontery to suppose that I am to continue to supply you, at this most unjustifiable rate, with money for which I must in some way account?”

“Madam, I do not call it unjustifiable; when a lady has a secret which she requires kept (and kept, too, at great personal risk), she must pay for the safety of it. It is on these grounds that I now demand my two hundred a year; provided,” she added, carelessly, “that your ladyship still requires the secret kept—*not unless.*”

Lady Bohun was in a reckless mood that night. It was on her lips to exclaim, “*I do not!* now do your worst!” but at the very instant that she would have uttered the words, the door opened, and Mr. and Mrs. Blackstone entered together. A glance showed them that they were interrupting an interview of a very agitating character; for Euphemia’s cheeks were crimson, and her whole

appearance reminded her mother of those very early days when, in the infant Phemy's violent rages, the utmost exertion of gentle determination was called into action to quell the fiery temper of the impulsive child.

But that a domestic should have had power to rouse her to this pitch, seemed to her parents unbecoming and wrong. They flew to her in affectionate haste, her father firmly convinced that she was now a lamentable case in point of the tyranny to which he had long seen she was insensibly yielding.

"My Phemy," they exclaimed, in one breath, "what has happened? how can we help you? Only give the due authority, and we shall see that you meet with no insolence from your menials."

The prominent idea in both those honest, open minds, was, that finding matters were "*going wrong*" in the house, this pampered domestic thinking only of herself, was about to make an honourable retreat from the sinking vessel whilst something could be saved from the wreck, but had given notice of her intentions in some obnoxious manner.

"Tell us what it is, my Phemy," they continued, Mr. Blackstone having prudently locked the door; "tell us only!"

But this was exactly what Lady Bohun could *not* do, as she well knew; and her terror lest Ponsford should be listening in the passage, held her lips still more firmly closed. All she could utter was,

“She is going, dear father; she is going!”

“And all the better, my dearest. She ought to have gone long ago.”

“And I have much to settle—much to arrange with her,” continued Lady Bohun, trembling from head to foot; “let her return for a few minutes. Go to bed, dearest father and mother, and reserve business till the morning—it is too late to-night—only let me just say one word to Ponsford.”

“Not alone,” said Mr. Blackstone, decisively; “you shall not be exposed to that woman’s insolence again, unless in the presence of either your mother or myself. I saw enough of her, as I entered, to judge of the mood she is in; and I recollect too well what I suffered in my youth.....”

“Papa dear, I am afraid I must see her, if only to say one word,” persisted Lady Bohun, too wretched now even to smile at her father’s well-known reminiscences.

“Cannot the word be spoken before witnesses?” asked her father, with equal pertinacity.

Lady Bohun hesitated—how was she to answer?

What could she say without criminating herself? And yet two words would suffice — either “I agree,” or “I refuse.” Why could she not say them? and them only? Gasping for breath, half-choked with emotion, she made one vehement effort at self-control, and took the fatal plunge.

“Call her in,” was all she could articulate; and whilst she and her mother sat in breathless silence, as if awaiting some dreadful doom, the old man walked, with a determined step and a firm face, out of the room.

Mrs. Blackstone had neither her husband’s firmness nor her daughter’s spirit. Her strength of mind had been sorely upset by the trials and troubles of the last few days, and she now found herself unable to do more than pillow that aching head upon her breast, and echo every sigh that burst from Lady Bohun’s lips.

But now came the sound of Mr. Blackstone’s returning steps, and Euphemia, believing she would now be called upon to renew the fearful encounter which had been interrupted, rose up ready for the emergency—rose up like a lioness—she felt there was a something urging her on to her destiny—nothing could avert it, so on she must go; it mattered little whether the pace were fast or slow

—the verge was reached—it was for Ponsford to give the push.

Mr. Blackstone entered. Oh ! intense relief, he was alone !

“ My dear, the woman has shut herself into her room, locked the door, and told your maid, Estelle, that she was going to bed. Would you wish her summoned ? ”

“ Oh ! no, no, no ! ” cried Euphemia, clasping her hands in transport at the reprieve ; “ no ! I would have gone through it if necessary, but as it so happens, so let it be. Let me have a little breathing time ; I can bear no more to-night ; to-morrow I may be better able ; to-morrow, in fact, I *must* ! ”

And grasping at the straw on which to rest, that drowning soul tried to close her eyes in forgetfulness.

CHAPTER XVI.

LADY BOHUN awoke the next morning with all the sensations with which one is always oppressed after a day of great grief, great joy, or great fatigue.

First, the feeling of bewilderment—she only knew at first that some tremendous blow had fallen upon her; what was it? then she had a vague recollection of a scene with Ponsford—a scene which was to be repeated—so thus far she felt that her eyes had only opened to misery. Then came a recollection of the moments just before her eyes closed in sleep.....she remembered all the unusually heavy steps backwards and forwards along the oak passages. Now she remembered that the lawyers were in the house—yes, and the reason they were there! Then the last sounds she heard—a scuffling and scrambling along the gallery. Ah! shame, grief, and bitter humiliation!—those were the footsteps of the men servants carrying

Captain Sydney Aylmer off to bed. Alas, and alas ! that was no unusual sound ; it was only a part of her wakening from the day-dream of her life, her love-match !

Yes, all these recollections came crowding on her with overwhelming force as she woke up from sleep, and then she looked round her with a sort of "Where am I?" glance.

She was not in her bed ; not even divested of the *peignoir* in which she had spent the previous evening ; she had fallen asleep in her arm-chair, and on looking towards her bed, she saw her mother occupying it, peacefully sleeping—to tell the truth, snoring.

"Happy creature ! dear old mother ! I shall never sleep again as you are sleeping now !" thought Lady Bohun, as she looked at the calm and comely features, and then she returned to her chair to think over the probable trials of the new day before her.

First, of Ponsford. To accede to her demand was of course, compulsory ; she had no alternative ; and yet in the heat of the moment, the evening before, she must certainly have given the woman to understand that she was about to combat the point, if not absolutely to refuse her demand. What would this refusal entail upon her ? She was

afraid to think; she must leave that to the power that says, "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof."

What she would have liked to know was, Ponsford's sentiments upon that last most stormy interview.

"To all appearance, I was her match; but in heart, oh! what a coward!"

And now the various sounds of early morning began to echo through the long passages of Bohun Court. Shutters were opened, great bars and bolts withdrawn, and Mrs. Blackstone woke to wonder how she could possibly have overslept Phemy, who was generally so lazy in the morning.

Then came Mr. Blackstone. He was going to breakfast with Messrs. Deedes and Grim. "It is but civil, my dear, for Sydney says he has a bad headache."

Messrs. Deedes and Grim were to go by the mid-day train, and suddenly there arose in Euphemia's mind the idea that she must not let them go until she had settled Mrs. Ponsford. Consequently, there must first be the dreadful and dreaded interview with *her*, and then a sort of specious and confidential conversation with the

lawyers—reducing the establishment, an old servant going away, retiring pension, &c., &c.

Now that she was fairly plunged into the depths of it, Lady Bohun's courage and spirit rose with the circumstances; and as soon as she and her mother had taken their silent, scanty, hasty, wretched meal—that sort of meal that one takes, half choked by every morsel, when a great grief is upon us—she called Estelle, and desired her to summon Mrs. Ponsford.

“Five minutes will suffice, dearest mother; when five minutes have elapsed, do you come in accidentally.”

But vain the precautions, thrown away all the plotting and planning! Estelle came back with the face of a ghost.

“Miladi, Mrs. Ponsford is gone!”

“Gone?” Euphemia's eyes opened to their fullest extent, and her breath seemed to stop; “how do you mean *gone*?”

“She has left Bohun Court—she has taken all her things—she went away by the Parliamentary train,” were the sentences panted forth by Estelle, with the real alarm of innocence, and there was a dead silence. Words fell from Lady Bohun's lips, but they were uttered more as a deep groan than in articulate sounds. Even her mother could not

have guessed that they framed the sentence, "*Then I am lost!*"

There came over her face a lived hue of undefined terror. She was expecting she knew not what—this was the dawn of what appeared to her the darkest day of her life.

And there she sat, a numbness creeping over her, listening to every sound, and starting at every footfall, but uttering no syllable; and her mother had the tact and the charity to sit by her side in silence—the greatest kindness she could bestow upon her.

The reflections of those few morning hours aged Lady Bohun twenty years. The worn looks and the neglected hair—for to submit to the touch of even Estelle's handy fingers would have been torture—all told their weary tale. People in affliction or distress seldom think of personal appearance, and it was Mrs. Blackstone herself who took courage, and at last approached the living statue, passing a soft handkerchief, dipped in rose-water, over the pallid features, and rolling the masses of dark hair up into their net of gold thread, "just to make her fit to be seen."

"By whom?" thought the wretched young wife: "whom am I to see next?"

The departure of Ponsford had created an extra-

ordinary sensation through the house, and when Mr. Blackstone heard of it, he looked upon it as something so mysterious and singular, that, without saying anything to his daughter, he began to make a few inquiries about her departure amongst the domestics. When did she go?—how did she go?—had she had any letters? and had she seen her ladyship before her departure?

“She went away at a quarter before six in the morning. Her old friend, William, the groom, had brought round the brougham for her, and a cart had taken a regular load of luggage (ergo, the departure was not unpremeditated); no letters had arrived so early, but the telegraph boy had been seen at the lodge. Mrs. Ponsford, it was supposed, had taken leave of her ladyship the evening before; certainly, she had not been near Lady Bohun’s rooms that morning.”

To all, excepting Lady Bohun herself, that hasty flight was a mystery, but to Euphemia it was none. All she could think, all she could say to herself was, “I am lost. I exasperated her, and she will ruin me!”

And nothing remained for her now but to await, with the patience of utter recklessness, the issue of this long-endured tyranny, for it was evidently drawing to a climax.

There are certain hours in our existence, sometimes hours of illness, sometimes hours of pain, or of great solitude, or of great grief, when the years of our lives seem to pass before us in review, by month, and week, and day, and hour—nay, and when even moments are recalled to our recollection as vividly as though we were living them over again.

In this singular review, brought before us almost miraculously, the most hardened can, if they choose, trace the hand of Providence. It is the still small voice of warning, as if a vision of the Judgment Day, very faintly traced, were held for an instant before our eyes to show us what the past has been, and ask us what the future is to be !

Is there a living soul in the world who can look upon that vision without a shudder? or who can lay his hand on his heart and say, “were I to begin life again, even as I have acted, just so would I act again”?

No. There is not one who would not tremble at the retrospect, and it is to be hoped that there are but few who would not but be thankful that the chance had been given them, either to reflect, to repent, or to amend—for when this vision comes across one, it is like a check in one’s life—an awful

something saying to the traveller, "stop"—and we *must* stop, for it is no mortal voice that we obey.

On this eventful morning, in that brief hour of solitude, when the sense of impending misfortune was heavy upon Lady Bohun, this vision passed before her, and she stopped—stopped in her life, to look, *not back*, but absolutely *down* upon it, for there it lay, spread out widely before her, clear as day, every thought, word, and deed !.....

"Repentance taketh sin away,
Death remedies the rest....."

Yes, and happy and blessed are those to whom time and the warning are permitted. It does not fall to the lot of all to be thus called upon to stop. Some have neither time nor opportunity for repentance—they have thrown both away—in that case, what remedy has death ?

But Lady Bohun gazed at the vision, and as she gazed, scalding tears of repentance half-blinded her—scalding tears, too, of remorse, for, after all, what had Sir Guy Bohun ever done to her, that, from the very first, she should have lent herself to a scheme to injure him to the utmost of her ability ? But, said the dark angel by her side, you were but a tool in the hand of another, and Sir Guy Bohun was the skeleton in your cupboard.

“ Why was I a tool? What had he done that from our earliest acquaintance I should thus set myself against him? Why did I persecute him from the beginning? make his home miserable to him? drive him from it? destroy the only favourite he had?—oh! petty piece of wanton cruelty!—finally, when there was enough and abundance for all, rob him of his rights, and secretly connive to impoverish him? then, when it was in my power to reinstate him—to say, the codicil exists, take back your own?—why did I shrink, a cowardly culprit, from exposing my fellow-sinner? Why did I fear to offend that wretched woman? How is it that I never saw till now that as soon as she had gained her own ends, of course she would turn against me? And now she has gained them; she has made *her* fortune just as mine is slipping from my grasp! She will wind up her miserable plot by publicly disgracing *me*, whilst she herself will sink into the easy obscurity of her station! But I deserve it.....I am only repaid.....‘*vengeance is mine—I will repay,*’ yes, and I deserve to be repaid to the uttermost, so I must bear it—and I could have borne it had it been any soul living but Sir Guy Bohun! Good Heavens! to think of the horror of being lowered in *his* eyes!”

Yes—she who had always held herself so high!

In the midst of this stupor of thought, for it was more than a reverie, Lady Bohun was startled by the sudden entrance of her father, and he in his turn was startled by the ghastly expression of her countenance.

"I was coming to tell you that Deedes and Grim are going, my dear," said he, "and to ask if you would see them; but, really, you do look so dreadfully ill.....are you ill, Phemy?"

"Dear father, ought I to see them?"

"My child, they have been very kind and painstaking—they have got through the business wonderfully—matters are not so bad as they looked—and so it would be a civility just to see them, and say a few words of acknowledgment.....that is to say, if you are equal to it.....but, my dearest, you look like a ghost; you really must bear up; don't give way now that the worst is over."

"The worst?" cried Lady Bohun, and then, suddenly bursting into a passion of tears, she sobbed hysterically.

Mr. Blackstone was very much alarmed, but he did not run for assistance. He had the sense to see and feel, that the quieter such exhibitions were kept, the better for his daughter's position in the eyes of her household. He stood and soothed and scolded her by turns. Poor good man! how little

he knew the cause of that hysterical fit, but he had heard a scolding was good for the complaint, so he administered it, intermingled with many tender re-assurances.

He was just entering into all the legal details, and telling her how with a few years' care and economy she could redeem the immense sums lost and expended (for it now appeared that Captain Aylmer's gambling debts were something incredible), when that nervous bell of Bohun Court, sounding more sepulchral even than usual, rang in Lady Bohun's ear, and starting from her chair, she clasped her hands tightly together, and stood listening breathlessly.

Scuffling feet, hurrying backwards and forwards, doors opening and shutting, loud voices, and steps running along the uncarpeted galleries, made the silent old house sound all alive in a moment.

With dilated eyes and quivering lips, Lady Bohun listened—listened with a strained attention painful to witness. She grasped her father's hand close to her breast. "*Save me!*" she whispered, and the old man looked down upon her in grief and anxiety.

"Her mind is going," was his first idea, and then he proceeded to try and calm her. "My child, it is only the carriage for Deedes and Grim ;

you know I told you they were to leave at twelve o'clock. Possibly, they have persuaded Sydney to go with them ; if so, it is his wisest and safest plan, for he *must* get out of the way for the next few months."

"Father," she continued, in the same alarmed whisper, "it is no one *going*—it is some one *come*! Save me, for mercy's sake! save me!" and she clung to him still more closely.

"You will see Sydney?" said Mr. Blackstone, gently.

"It has nothing to do with Sydney," she replied.

"Phemy, I will send your mother to you," exclaimed the old man, disengaging his hand in real fear, yet trying to speak in a peremptory voice ; "you have a certain duty to go through, my child—have a stout heart, and do it manfully ; I will send your mother to you."

"Save me !" repeated Lady Bohun wildly, "they are coming—save me !"

"No one shall enter this room without your permission, my dear," answered her father, for he, too, began now to be aware that there was an arrival in the house, and that under present circumstances, such an event was certainly to be dreaded.

He had hardly uttered the words than a footman knocked at the door.

"Some gentlemen, sir, very anxious to see her ladyship as soon as possible."

"Very well," was Mr. Blackstone's hasty answer ; "tell them Captain Aylmer is at home."

"I did say so, sir, but the gentlemen said it was her ladyship they wished to see."

"Then take wine and biscuits into the library, and say Lady Bohun will be down immediately."

When Mr. Blackstone turned towards his daughter, after giving these brief directions, Euphemia lay back in her chair senseless.

It was now absolutely necessary to summon Estelle as well as Mrs. Blackstone, whilst the poor distressed father went down to see what these gentlemen could possibly want with his daughter, and who they were.

"She was quite right, poor soul," thought he to himself, as he shuffled down stairs ; "she evidently has some suspicions which *I* know nothing aboutwheel within wheel.....dear me !.....my heart begins to misgive me.....what *can* they want? Gentlemen, your servant."

The precise and formal old man thus presented himself to the four strangers before him, and eyed

them keenly. At a glance he could see that two were gentlemen—two were not.

“Mr. Blackstone, I presume,” began the eldest of the group; “excuse me, sir, but our business is most urgent; forgive this abrupt intrusion and these apparently impertinent measures, but we have found it necessary to take a great liberty; we have stormed your house, as it were, and whilst we are in it, we are compelled to prevent any of the inmates leaving it.”

“Gentlemen, you alarm me,” said Mr. Blackstone, now quailing himself; “but you may rest assured no one over whom you have any claim will be suffered to escape. I would only make an appeal for my daughter’s solicitors, Messrs. Deedes and Grim, who are obliged to start by the mid-day train. May I ask if this business relates in any way to the affairs of my son-in-law, Captain Aylmer?”

“Not in the least. But as we also wish to return by that train, if we *could* see Lady Bohun immediately?.....”

Mr. Blackstone explained his daughter’s state, assuring the visitors that he was, at the same time, sure she would do her utmost.....

“Is it likely to be very distressing intelligence to her, gentlemen?” he asked, turning back at the

door as he was leaving the room, "for I assure you she is very ill. She has had much to try her, lately."

"Not to Lady Bohun personally," was the evasive answer; and too nervous to ask more, or even to inquire the names of these intruders, Mr. Blackstone returned to his daughter.

Lady Bohun was just reviving, looking like death, and a scared expression on her countenance. Her father repeated the little that had passed, and exhorted her to be firm and rouse herself.

"Get it over, my dear. We must not keep them waiting, for they must go back to town by the same train as our own party, singularly enough. Now rouse up, for appearance sake. Let us put a good face on our own sad affairs as long as we can."

"But who.....what can it be?.....who are they?"

It had never occurred either to Mr. Blackstone, or any one else to ask, so great was the confusion, excitement, and dismay pervading every corner of the house. It had seemed enough that they had effected their entrance, and demanded an interview in terms and tones hardly to be denied.

Propped up by pillows, supported temporarily by strong stimulants, the once dauntless Lady

Bohun heard her visitors enter the room and approach her. Again almost on the verge of fainting, she raised her eyes.

"Good heavens! Mr. Topham!"

Yes! Mr. Topham, Mr. Charles Topham, and two odd-looking strangers behind them, upon whom the frightened glance of Lady Bohun rested uneasily. She could not breathe quite freely yet. What could their errand be?

"Yes, Lady Bohun," began the elder brother, "and grieved to see you so ill. We renew our acquaintance under very uncomfortable circumstances, I regret to say, and nothing but the urgency of the case would have induced us to persist in intruding upon you. But our mission is one of very great importance; it relates to an individual beneath your roof at this moment."

"Sydney?" thought Lady Bohun.

"One in whom I have no doubt you—like every one else—have placed unbounded confidence."

"Yes?" almost inaudibly, but interrogatively.

"Your servant—*Ponsford*!"

A cold dew seemed to creep over Euphemia at this name.

"We hold a warrant," continued Mr. Topham, "for the apprehension of *Mira Ponsford*."

Every one started except Lady Bohun. She

could hardly turn whiter than she was already, but she looked fainter, and her voice sounded strange as she exclaimed, "Of what is she accused?"

"*Of forgery!*" cried the four voices at once, and there was a dead silence for a moment, for the shock of the abrupt announcement was great to, at least Mr. and Mrs. Blackstone, if not to their daughter. She, however, hid whatever emotion she might have felt, by covering her face with her hands.

None present could tell what that action signified. To Mr. Topham and his brother it was but a natural gesture of surprise and horror.

"We cannot wonder at any distress you may feel, Lady Bohun," continued Mr. Charles Topham; "but when you consider for how many, many years this wretched woman has exerted her marvellous influence over all her employers for the worst of purposes, you can hardly grieve that at last her sin should find her out....."

"On what charge?" gasped Euphemia.

"By something approaching a miracle," continued the elder brother; "we have succeeded, after years of patient search and investigation, in ascertaining that the will of my late wife, Lady Mary, which at the time filled us all with astonishment, is an undoubted forgery. More than sus-

picion rests on Ponsford. Secondly, this discovery has led to another, relating to the will of my mother-in-law, Lady Merivale, the bequests in which nearly beggared us, whilst this woman reaped the richest harvest. However, all this will appear in due time. What we wish to prepare you for is, the conviction of one in whom I fear you also have placed great confidence, and to tell you of the possibility of your having to give evidence against her.....”

“ Ah ! no, no, no ! ” cried Lady Bohun, with a shriek of terror ; “ anything in the world but that ! I could not—I would not—I *dare* not face Ponsford in such a position.”

A glance was exchanged between the brothers.

“ Your ladyship doubts her guilt ? ” asked one of the strangers.

“ I doubt nothing—I know nothing ! ” she continued wildly ; “ and I have nothing to say—only do not ask me to appear against her on any plea whatever. I hoped, fervently hoped I had looked my last on her.....”

“ What ! ” cried Mr. Topham, starting ; “ is she not here—under this roof—in Bohun Court ? ”

“ She left most unexpectedly, without a word of leave or warning, this morning,” said Mr. Blackstone, coming forward.

A look of blank dismay passed over the faces of the group.

"She must have had some inkling of the affair," said the younger brother, "and so escaped us. Lady Bohun, I implore you to tell us all you know! Had you no suspicion?"

"Of what?" asked Euphemia, trembling from head to foot.

"Of her reason for leaving you so suddenly? Did she not in any way lead you to suppose that she was about to leave you?"

"My dear," said Mr. Blackstone, advancing to his daughter's side, and placing his hand on her shoulder; "you must answer candidly, if you please. I beg you, *for my sake*, to do so. You may have some natural regard for this woman—(though I confess I always had the worst opinion of her)—but in concealing any information it may be in your power to give these gentlemen who have been so deeply wronged and injured by her, you are defeating the ends of justice."

"But I know nothing," was the reply, whilst she again hid her face, but this time on her father's arm.

"Forgive me!" said the elder Mr. Topham, touched by an anguish which, of course, he could

not quite comprehend in such a case, "but if you could only give me a clue.....if you would but say where you think she may be concealed....."

"I have no reason to think she is concealed at all," replied Lady Bohun, looking up quickly.

"But you knew she was going?"

"Phemy, my darling," whispered her father; "speak of yourself, otherwise they may compel you."

"All I know, *you* shall know," was her answer, rousing herself by a violent effort; "Ponsford entered my room yesterday evening, and gave me warning. I always knew she would go some day. I did not know when it might be, but I was aware that she was engaged to be married."

"She said nothing of leaving you in this manner, without any notice?"

"Not a syllable."

"Then she had got wind of this," muttered one of Mr. Topham's companions; "we had better be off."

"Mr. Topham," interposed Mr. Blackstone, hastily, "allow me to suggest the telegraph. It may overtake her, at all events it must follow her very closely; stand on no ceremony with us, but start immediately; and now I think of it....."

Phemy, my dear, was not that her intended husband that man in the Albany, of the same name as herself?"

"Yes," said his daughter, in a low whisper.

"Then no doubt that is her destination; gentlemen, it seems inhospitable, but I beg you not to mind us," continued the old man in a fever of anxiety, and without giving Lady Bohun another glance, the whole party rushed out of the room.

Euphemia leant back in her chair, and clasped her hands.

"If they should succeed in taking her! in seizing her! if she should be convicted.....imprisoned.....good heavens! *I shall be free!* If she should be transported?.....could she tell, I wonder, as a prisoner? would she be allowed to make revelations?.....no, hardly; for it would but be criminating herself doubly.....oh! that I could but feel her safe within the iron grasp of those injured men, and I would take up every board, and pull down every brick, and pull down Bohun Court itself, rather than that fatal codicil should not be found! She said she had replaced it in its hiding-place.....wretched woman.....and yet she had the face to call it *my secret!*.....Mine? is it mine?.....yes.....*it exists*.....so much of it *is*

mine ! and I have kept it secret ! ah me ! how my heart smote me when Mr. Topham said her sin had found her out ! how do I know how soon mine will find *me* ?”

And like a statue, the heart-broken lady of Bohun Court sat and listened to the stir in the house, till the sounds, and the voices, and the feet had all subsided, and the most profound silence succeeded.

All were gone. Twelve o'clock struck. The train itself was gone now, but the telegram had gone on long before.

“ If it has done its work well, she is now in custody !—arrested !—Ponsford *a prisoner* !”

Enough to chill the life blood of a higher heart even than Lady Bohun's.

Yes. She had heard the departure of the three parties, the lawyers, the Messrs. Topham, and Captain Aylmer. All were to depart by the same train, yet all would take care to occupy different carriages, for they were an antagonistic set. But she had seen no more of them, not even of her husband. He seemed to take it for granted that if she had wanted to see him, she would have sent for him. As it was, he was very glad. “ Good-byes were a great bore, and he knew Phemy was

savage with him," were his parting words, and thus he took his farewell of Bohun Court.

And now Euphemia was alone—alone with her father and mother—alone with her thoughts, and with her conscience. .

CHAPTER XVII.

THE telegraph wires did their work well, as they ever do. The cab which conveyed Mrs. Ponsford from the station to the Albany, was followed by another, and as she calmly paid her fare, the hand of a policeman was placed on her shoulder.

“Mrs. Ponsford, I think. I must detain you, if you please, ma’am.”

The same undisturbed expression which had sat on that face through every stirring passage of her life, sat on it still, as Ponsford turned with perfect self-possession towards the speaker.

“You will be so good as to accompany me into the house,” said she haughtily, for she had the presence of mind to retain the same bearing which always characterised her, in order that the true state of things should not be apparent to the servant, who had come out to receive her luggage; and with two policemen following at less than arm’s-

length, she led the way into the chambers, which she certainly could not have expected to enter so attended.

"Now," said she, turning coolly towards them, "your warrant if you please."

The telegraphic message was exhibited with a smile of derision, and her countenance changed for the first time.

"I don't think we've made any mistake, ma'am," said one of them, "so now my brother officer here must go back and wait for further orders. You needn't mind me, ma'am. I must just sit and watch you, that's all. Another couple of us are stationed outside."

To this gentle hint, Ponsford replied by sitting down and taking off her bonnet. At that moment the door opened and a man entered, followed by the "couple of us," who had been outside. An expressive look was all that passed between him and Ponsford, but by the ghastly pallor of his countenance it was evident he did not bear up with the same stoicism which marked the conduct of his fair intended, this being Mr. Ponsford.

"You had better go," said Ponsford, at last addressing him, "these persons have no authority to detain *you*."

"I shall not leave you, Mira," was the answer.

"*You must*," said she, firmly, keeping her eyes fixed on him in a way which he apparently understood; for a moment he hesitated; "go for the present," she added, "if you are wanted, you can be sent for."

The policemen eyed the pair of lovers very suspiciously, yet what she said was true, their authority did not extend so far as the man, their instructions were to stop the woman described in the telegram, and detain in custody her luggage, and everything in the shape of papers, in the house to which they tracked her.

"Look at him, well," whispered one policeman to the other, "we *shall* want him, I suspect, so make sure of your man again."

An hour passed. It would be two before those men would know what they were to do with their prisoner, and the time lagged fearfully to all except the chief person concerned. She had taken out pen, ink, and paper, and sat herself down to write.

The officers kept talking amongst themselves in a voice inaudible to her. "Look at her hand—that don't look a guilty one—cool as a cucumber."

"Wonder what the charge is, eh? not a stealing case?"

"No. Something pen and ink, for a guinea."

At last she looked up.

"I have written a letter here," said she, folding it up, "which I suppose I may be allowed to send, with an enclosure, to the person to whom it is addressed. Am I to give it into your charge?"

"If you please, ma'am."

"Will you pledge yourselves that it reaches its destination?"

"It will be handed over to the proper authorities, ma'am, with all your other papers."

"But this paper does not belong to me. It is a document of exceeding importance belonging by right to Sir....."

"You needn't tell us, ma'am. Better say nothing. All you say, we shall have to repeat, and it may tell against you, you see."

At this moment there was a rush of many feet across the courtyard, and the small room in which sat Ponsford and her guardians, seemed suddenly full of people.

Two gentlemen came hastily forward, dusty, heated, breathless.

"So, Mrs. Ponsford! caught at last, by Jove!"

It was Mr. Charles Topham, who, with malignant glee, thus hurled at the scornful figure before him this indignant recognition.

Silent, with her marble face and curling lips, she rose, but said nothing.

"Now to business," were his next words; "have you seized every paper belonging to her?.....and her property?.....there were some pearls.....have you put seals upon everything?"

"A moment if you please," said the gentle voice, "a moment of attention, Mr. Charles. And Mr. Topham.....if you please, sir, of what am I accused?"

"Forgery, Ponsford," said the quiet brother, laconically.

"Are you provided with *certain* proof, Mr. Topham?"

"Ponsford, you have not a loophole out of which you can creep," he replied, with emphatic disdain.

"Very well, sir. Then now to another subject. I conclude that I may be permitted to place in your hands a document of great value, relating to Bohun Court. The persons who arrested me have refused to receive it, though I offered it openly. I wish for no concealments. It is no longer necessary to conceal it. Hitherto it has been a secret—a secret between myself and Lady Bohun."

There was "great sensation," as the newspapers

say, when Ponsford paused, but the pause was very brief.

"I conclude," she added, "that it is to Lady Bohun I am indebted for my arrest. I have no doubt she afforded you every information in her power as to my probable hiding-place, but you see I have not hidden myself."

"Ponsford, you wrong Lady Bohun," began Mr. Topham.

"Do I, sir?" she returned, carelessly; "I do not think so. Her ladyship has every reason to wish me out of the way, and her anxiety to get rid of me is very natural, as you will acknowledge when you know all. Mr. Topham, before seals are placed on my papers, I wish this one in particular to be taken charge of by you. No magistrate or judge can oppose this, for it is not mine, neither have I anything to do with it. It is the codicil of which you may remember to have heard at the time of Sir Felix Bohun's death."

"The lost codicil!" cried both brothers at once, darting forwards to seize it.

"Never lost—only detained by me!" continued Ponsford, calmly; "detained for Lady Bohun's sake, as she well knows."

"Woman! *can* this be true!" exclaimed the most vehement of the brothers, Mr. Charles, and

then it suddenly struck him, Lady Bohun's singular conduct throughout the interview of that morning. Above all, her anxiety to screen Ponsford, and her terror at the prospect of meeting her again, or of having to appear against her.

"True as that I stand here," said Ponsford; "true, as you can very easily prove, and as indeed you must prove, if you have any regard for Sir Guy Bohun, which I believe you have. Mr. Topham, I give it in charge to you, with this letter to Mr. Blackstone—will you see that both reach him?"

"If I could believe a word you say....." began Mr. Topham.

"Words of mine need not be believed," she replied, coolly; "the fact will prove itself. Sir Guy Bohun is the rightful owner of Bohun Court. Her ladyship is nobody there. Her ladyship might have purchased my silence for life, but she did not choose to do so, consequently, I throw up the game. Had I had time to insist upon her acceding to my demands, I should not have been here now. It is her fault that my escape was prevented, therefore I consider myself justified in no longer keeping her secret."

"Wretched woman!" cried Mr. Charles Topham,

"how you have stung the hand that has fostered you so long!"

"Not at all," said Ponsford, "I gave Lady Bohun her choice."

"Fiend! and you have held this codicil over her head all this time to serve your own most base and nefarious purposes!"

"Abuse me as you please, Mr. Charles. I do not call myself any worse than her ladyship, who, in spite of all her wealth, suffered me to hold it over her head, as you call it; nay, *paid* me to do so!"

A murmur of utter astonishment and disgust ran through the group. The villany of Ponsford little surprised the Topham family, but that one so young and apparently artless as Lady Bohun should have aided and abetted so foul a scheme—which fact certainly did *not* admit of a doubt—filled the brothers with disgust and indignation, a fellow-feeling having made them always look upon Sir Guy Bohun as a friend.

"And that letter to Mr. Blackstone—will you see that he receives it?" asked Ponsford, after a pause, addressing Mr. Topham.

"I suppose so," he answered. "Yes, I do not imagine that any objection will be offered to that. However, I do not promise. You are now in the

hands of the law, Ponsford ; and depend upon it, whatever betide, the law shall take its course, and *will* do so, whether I please or no. Consequently, I believe these will be the last words exchanged between myself and you in this world, and I bid you farewell accordingly !”

CHAPTER XVIII.

A CHRISTIAN spirit animated Mr. Topham, but his brother was of a more vindictive nature. The former took leave of the woman who had done her best to rob him of his rights and reduce him to poverty, with a sort of grieved sadness in his tone. The latter eyed her with the eager glance of a lynx, longing for the moment which was at hand, when the strong hand of justice and the law, took real tangible hold of her, and carried her from their sight.

Then his joy burst forth ; his joy and his exultation. Sir Guy Bohun, who had borne so silently, so unresistingly, and so proudly his wrongs, reinstated ! “ And by my means after all ! ” he exclaimed ; “ for if I had not been moving heaven and earth for years, you never would have had energy to go through with it,” (addressing his brother); “ and now our first move must be back to Bohun Court,

to place this valuable codicil in the hands of Mr. Blackstone."

"Impossible!" exclaimed the elder brother, with some indignation; "go and watch the sufferings of that poor old man, when the culpability of his daughter is laid bare before him? Charles, you must have a heart of stone to dream of such a thing? No; we must go to Bland and Frumpton directly, give it to them, and leave them to pursue the proper course regarding it. Sir Guy is abroad; they will, of course, send for him. As for this letter to Mr. Blackstone, I shall deliver that over to them, too. We have no right to read it. That woman has told us all that we have any right to know, and now let us wash our hands of the affair. To me it is absolutely painful, for I think the discovery will kill that poor old man; and I would not be present when it is told him, for all the money in the world."

When the lost codicil was presented to Messrs. Bland and Frumpton, no words could express their triumph and delight. If it had been a piece of extraordinary good luck to themselves, they could not have hailed it with more genuine joy, for they now recollected that humiliating day when the new will of Sir Felix Bohun had been read out in their presence, and their own repeated and emphatic

assurance that there was a later one, treated with scorn and something very like insult.

Mr. Topham's first question naturally was, "Now what shall you do?" and their answer was ready.

"Summon Sir Guy Bohun to England immediately—by telegraph, indeed, this very day—and start by the first train to Bohun Court, to break the news to Lady Bohun."

Mr. Charles Topham was on the point of bursting out with the exclamation, "She knows it already—she has known it all along!" but his brother seemed to see the very words on his lips, and by an imperative gesture restrained him.

"Be quiet," he whispered; "it will all be known soon enough. Leave them to act as they please."

And this was the course that the lawyers pursued. By an early train the following morning, they arrived at Bohun Court; but before they reached the house, many whispers had been breathed which made them pretty well *au fait* as to what had been going on the day before. It was an unfortunate moment to arrive, laden with such intelligence, but their duty must be done, and driving up to the grand old entrance, they asked for Lady Bohun.

Lady Bohun was ill. This was not a mere con-

ventional phrase which the servants were ordered to deliver to all inquiries. Lady Bohun was really and truly ill. Her eyes had not closed in sleep for two nights ; no food had passed her lips ; she lay in a sort of torpor, and her medical man had asked for further advice.

Her father and mother were neither surprised nor alarmed. " She would have been more than human had these events not completely prostrated her," they said. As for further advice, it might be a satisfaction to the doctor, but none to *them*. How could any one minister to a mind diseased ?—the old, old story ! So, in sorrowful patience, they waited till time, the weary spirit's best physician, should work her recovery.

But she was too ill, certainly, to be seen or spoken to on matters of business ; in this, both her father and mother fully agreed with the doctor ; therefore, when Messrs. Bland and Frumpton were announced, Mr. Blackstone candidly told them that they must accept him as Lady Bohun's representative, since to see his daughter, in their official capacity, was impossible.

Mr. Bland was a kind-hearted man and a thorough gentleman ; Mr. Frumpton was so shy that, in all difficult cases, Mr. Bland was the spokesman ; therefore, on the occasion in question,

all Mr. Bland's powers of kindliness and tact had to be put into requisition. It required no ordinary delicacy of mind and manner to make so painful an announcement as that with which he was charged, although it was not to the deposed queen herself that it was to be made. Even to her father, Mr. Bland felt the difficulty of his task, but he began cautiously—broke it very carefully, and completed it with consummate skill.

So gradually did the light break upon Mr. Blackstone, thanks to the manner in which the subject was handled, that instead of exhibiting the distress which might have been expected, his first exclamation was one of exceeding delight.

"Sir Guy righted at last! indeed, I am truly glad! sincerely rejoiced! but surely it is not for the forgery of Sir Felix Bohun's will that that wretched Ponsford was arrested yesterday? You do not mean that my daughter has all this time been reaping the harvest of a forged will?"

"Not at all," was the answer. "Mrs. Ponsford stands charged with the forgery of the will of Lady Mary Topham; but it is owing to her arrest that this lost codicil has come to light."

"Then she held it concealed?" said the old man, hastily.

"Apparently, she did," replied Mr. Bland, and

then he was silent. He could have said more, but his heart failed him before that poor old father, whose anxious eyes began now to be mystified.

"Tell me all," said he at last, "tell me what you know. You cannot possibly for one instant imagine that any of us knew of so infamous an act."

"I am *sure* you did not," answered Mr. Bland, emphatically—perhaps too emphatically, for suddenly Mr. Blackstone took alarm.

"Sir," said he, the muscles of his face beginning to quiver, "there is something in this that I do not understand—something behind the curtain that I *will* understand. Are you hiding anything from me?—if you are, it is cruel kindness. I rejoice in Sir Guy Bohun's re-instatement. I should rejoice still more to be the first to say, 'your home is your's again,' although most bitter events of late will mingle very much of alloy in our cup of satisfaction when we restore the estate to him; stillyour manner does not quite satisfy me..... you have left some part of your story untold..... what is it?"

Mr. Bland took a letter out of his pocket. It was Ponsford's.

"I was commissioned," he said, "to give you this. I am not acquainted with the contents, but I

conclude they will explain the whole story, since that unhappy woman can no longer have any reason for concealment."

Mr. Blackstone sat down, put on his spectacles, began to read, and in a few moments the letter fell from his hands, as they dropped powerless by his side.

The solicitors both hastened to his assistance—they loosened his cravat, and poured out a glass of water from him—but it was many minutes before the large veins—swelled like whipcords on the old man's forehead—subsided again.

"False," was the first sound that issued from his lips. "False.....a lie, as foul as ever perjured wretch conceived!—false, I would stake my existence!—false—false," he kept muttering. At last he looked up. "Is this public?" he asked, tapping the letter with his finger.

"I believe no eye but yours has seen it," was the reply.

"Will it have to be made public?"

"I think not—I hope not—we do not know..."

The old man rose.

"Take me to my daughter," said he. He had entered that room with a firm step, hale, and strong, and erect. He stood now, bent nearly double, and tottering in every limb.

"Take me to my daughter," he repeated, stretching out his trembling hands, "take me quickly, lest I die before I know the truth..... support me.....I can guide myself.....only support me."

And he led the way to Lady Bohun's room.

Mr. Bland was used to scenes like this. Though totally ignorant of the contents of Ponsford's letter, he considered the bare fact of the codicil's having been found, as quite sufficient to account for the agitation he now witnessed—indeed, he hardly attributed any part of it to anything *she* might have said. He well knew the confidential position that woman had held in all her situations; he knew, too, by report, that at Bohun Court she had been lady-paramount; thus, as he led those faltering steps along the galleries, he only thought to himself that the old man had suddenly given way at the task he had to perform—the painful task of opening his daughter's eyes to the fact, that from the proud pedestal she had so long occupied, she must now descend.

Each engrossed by their own thoughts, Mr. Blackstone and his companion hurried on. Without intimation of any kind, the former abruptly opened a door, and before he knew where he was

going, Mr. Bland found himself in the presence of Lady Bohun.

Stretched on a sofa, clad entirely in white, and looking like some beautiful waxen image, lay that inanimate figure, her hands folded in a deathlike attitude on her breast, and her eyes closed.

With staggering haste her father approached the sofa with only one word, and that was her name.

“*Euphemia.*”

At the sound of it she started up, for it was a name she had not heard since the days of Sir Felix. To her present husband, to her father, and to her mother, she was simply “Phemy,” and the formal name, pronounced in a strange and unfamiliar tone, smote suspiciously on her ear.

She started, as if from some long dream, and fixed her eyes, widely extended and bewildered, on Mr. Bland, in the first instance, and then, appealingly, on her father. That one look, furtive and conscience-stricken, was sufficient; it told more than any words could have said; it spoke volumes in the space of an instant.

Quick as thought, before Mr. Blackstone could prevent her, Lady Bohun slid from her sofa, and sinking, in the impulse of the moment, on her knees, she buried her face in her hands. She had seen that all was over—the secret was discovered—

her sin had found her out—and her despair took the attitude which best became one so crushed by remorse and shame.

Mr. Blackstone turned quietly away from her.

“Mr. Bland,” said he, with perfect composure, though there was unutterable anguish in the expression of his face, “I fear I must ask you to leave us.”

Convinced, when he entered that room, of his daughter's innocence, he had prepared himself to announce to her, exultingly, this climax of her favourite's baseness, and to read aloud, in the hearing of Mr. Bland, the letter to which he had not the remotest doubt but that his daughter would give an unqualified denial; but, alas! her reception of him dashed this expectation to the ground. Had she not sunk at his feet in that frantic manner, it would have been difficult to have convinced him of her guilt, but it was self-condemnation in itself, and the miserable old man could only stand there in his anguish—look at her—and believe!

“Rise,” said he at last, when her suffocating sobs subsided for a moment, “rise, and let me know the worst. That codicil is found—I need not tell you so, for you evidently know it; I ought rather to say, it is in my hand, for it was

never lost—as, perhaps, you also know! but, Euphemia,” he proceeded, with grave solemnity, “if what this woman says in her letter is true—if you *did* know that it existed, and have lived through your widowhood, and entered into your second marriage, a *walking lie* to all around you, save to this wretched creature whose fatal influence you must now acknowledge.....if you have done this.....”

“Of what does she accuse me?” cried Lady Bohun.

“You shall hear,” exclaimed her father, indignantly, “you shall hear her letter, for I will not frame such a charge in words of my own; but I tell you this, that if what she says be true, may God forgive me, but rather than that I should now live to say you are my child, I would gladly have stood by your open grave, and joyfully have heard the earth rattle on your coffin!”

“Kill me!” sobbed Lady Bohun, “but do not use such words as these! I know I have been very wicked, but not so bad, perhaps, as she says. Let me hear.....perhaps, I may still be able to repair my fault.....if I live, I may.”

“Your fault?—your crime, you mean—and repair it—how? Can you refund the enormous sums spent, squandered, and still owing? Can you bring back all the old days—the old servants?—

replace the fine old trees hewn down to meet the sinful extravagancies that have been committed? and can you give back to its rightful owner, Bohun Court as it used to be? But I will reproach you no more. Your conscience and your heart shall be your accusers, and your best punishment. If what this letter says be true, I shall know how to act."

He opened it—the papers quivering in his trembling grasp—his daughter still on her knees, but leaning back against her sofa—closed eyes, tear-stained cheeks, swollen features, could this be Lady Bohun?

He read.

" Sir,

" Through the instrumentality of your daughter, whom I have served with the most dangerous and fatal devotion, I find myself in a position from which she could have saved me. She has betrayed me; therefore, I consider the course I am taking as no breach of trust or honour. We made an agreement; it is at an end. We had a secret; it is discovered. The paper I enclose is the codicil to the will of Sir Felix Bohun—by some supposed to have been lost—by others never to have existed. I found it amongst the wearing apparel of Sir

Felix, and have concealed it ever since. *Lady Bohun paid me for doing so.* When her ladyship declined acting up to her agreement, I considered our contract at an end, and trust so important a document may find its way safely into your just and honourable hands.

“ Your obedient servant,

“ MIRA PONSFORD.”

“ Now,” said the old man, frigidly, as though he were addressing a total stranger, yet out of breath with the overpowering effort he was making to seem calm, “ I wish no reservations. Give me a plain yes or no. *Is—this—true?*” (slowly and distinctly.)

“ Not all.....no, father !..... not all !”

“ Yes or no ; you knew this codicil existed ?”

“ Only lately, so help me heaven ! I did *not* know it for long after the death of Sir Felix.”

“ Enough ; plain answers if you please ; you knew it ?.....”

“ She never told me so in words, never said exactly that she *had* it.....”

“ You paid her for concealing it ?”

“ She extorted sum after sum from me by threats which I dreaded she might put into execution, and latterly, in our money troubles, she.....”

“ Euphemia, if you had not a husband in whom to confide, had you not a father? unhappy child ! but enough.....you paid her?”

Lady Bohun was silent. Her father waited, hoping, fondly and vainly, for some refutation.....no.....none.....and then he folded up the letter again.

“ It is true,” said he, in a voice so changed, that even his daughter did not know it, and started ; “ it is true then, and I am a dishonoured man. As for you,” he added, turning severely towards her, “ there is but one course for you to pursue. With your own hands, you shall place this codicil in those of Sir Guy Bohun, and on your knees, guilty and debased, ask his pardon.”

A shriek, so long and shrill that the old walls rung again, echoed through the galleries of Bohun Court. Unheeding, her broken-hearted father turned and left the room. Scarcely had he closed the door, than Lady Bohun fell on her face, and a sudden rush of blood from a broken vessel flowed from her lips and deluged the floor where she lay, for hours, unheeded, and alone.

CHAPTER XIX.

WHEN Ponsford committed that long-lost codicil into the "just and honourable" hands of Mr. Blackstone, she did wisely, for she had a habit of watching everybody so narrowly that she soon became intimately acquainted with their characters, and Mr. Blackstone was about the only person in the world whom she held in veneration.

And yet, from the very first, she knew he had disliked her, and to the very last, distrusted her. Still, her vengeance would have been incomplete had she not sent it to some one who would see justice done to the injured, with unflinching severity, and this would be Mr. Blackstone, for that precise and formal old man was rigid in his justice, and stern in his integrity.

When he left his daughter, and returned to the men of business, he was an altered man. Ponsford's letter he, of course, kept to himself, but his

first question was, whether Sir Guy Bohun had been sent for, and when he might be expected to arrive.

Sir Guy, they said, was living in or near Brussels, but they thought a very few days would bring him to Bohun Court, and till his arrival, nothing more could be done, unless Mr. Blackstone wished to give a glance over the state of the property, &c., preparatory to his arrival.

But they little knew that the old man had all this at his fingers' ends. They only thought, when he politely preferred awaiting the arrival of Sir Guy, that he was very naturally wishing to put off the evil day; so they acquiesced accordingly, and having performed their mission, returned to town in a state of joy and exultation very unlike the usual phlegmatic character of the one, and the reserve of the other.

As for Mr. Blackstone, he immediately shut himself into his room, to think what his next course should be, and how he should break to his wife the news of this new misfortune, not of the finding of the codicil, but of the disgraceful share their only child had had in its concealment.

He had not been there long before the servants ran to him one after the other, to announce to him the illness of Lady Bohun, but he would not open

his door; he would see no one. In vain they said Lady Bohun was seriously ill.

"No wonder," muttered he, to himself, setting his teeth; "she would be indeed hardened were she not to feel the frightful position in which she has placed herself. No wonder she is ill!"

Then came Mrs. Blackstone, entreating admission; "Phemy's state is dangerous, measures must be taken promptly....."

"Take them," was his answer through the door, "but I can see no one."

Mrs. Blackstone imagined this singular obduracy was owing to the events connected with their son-in-law's affairs. Little did that poor fussy woman, so proud of her peerless Phemy, dream that it was the shadow now cast for ever on that beloved child's fair name, that had crushed to the earth her wretched father.

"Of course she is ill," murmured he, as he paced the room, "but ill or well I cannot see her. My eyes shall never rest on her face again, until I take Sir Guy Bohun into her presence, and see and hear her make the only atonement in her power. He will not be hard with her—I know his good and generous heart too well—he will not be hard with her. I only wish the world might treat her offence as *he* will—but if it becomes public—as I

fear it will and must—she can never appear again. She will be scouted from the face of society as surely as that miserable companion in her iniquity will become the victim of a just law !”

But in spite of the view Mr. Blackstone took of the case, he clung to the hope that his daughter's name might escape as far as publicity went. That she should appear in all her guilt before Sir Guy Bohun, he was quite determined ; he even rejoiced to think how severe would be that punishment, for he knew that with all her faults, she had always wished to appear her best in his eyes, though, perhaps, her motive was merely personal fear of one so immeasurably her superior ; but his father's heart still held so much of affection for her as to make him hope, with a sort of agonized fervour, that in the eyes of the world she might be spared.

Still, this was as yet all doubt and mystery. He could not tell how much it might have pleased Ponsford to reveal at the moment of her arrest. The woman who could write such a letter as that, would not be very scrupulous as to what lengths she would go in endeavouring to criminate, or at least to expose, the partner of her career of deception. But if he could keep it secret from his wife—if he could but conceal it from her, at all events

as long as possible, that was all he wished. He must leave the rest to Time and Destiny; he might have added, "and to the law," only the very name of the law made him shudder.

How many hours he paced that room in painful, thoughtful solitude, he never remembered. All outward sounds were lost upon him. After a time, no one molested him; everybody seemed to have so much to do that he was left to his reflections, until, in the dusk of the evening, he emerged, refusing all refreshment, and retired to his own room.

It was there that he first learnt from his wife the state of his daughter. Bathed in tears, Mrs. Blackstone told him of Phemy's having broken a bloodvessel, of another physician besides their own having been called in, and of her state having been pronounced one of the most imminent danger.

"And all owing to Sydney!" was her bitter exclamation; whilst Mr. Blackstone could only hide his face on his folded arms and groan.

* * * *

At a busy railway station outside a large French town, two travellers hurrying different ways, accidentally encountered each other. One was evidently outward-bound; the other, with a calm, untroubled face, making his way homeward with a sort of temperate haste.

As the latter came suddenly upon the former, he stopped with a start, for it was a face very familiar to him, and yet he could not recall, at the moment, the name. The glance and the meeting were so momentary, that until it was too late, as is always the case, the recognition was not mutual, but Sir Guy Bohun (our temperate traveller), had seen just enough to be convinced that the young man with the long, light beard and moustaches, who so pointedly avoided him, was no other than Captain Sydney Aylmer, and then there flashed through Sir Guy's mind a sudden light.

"Why did he cut me so decidedly? Can he have anything to do with my telegram?"

And he watched him plunge into a distant carriage with mingled feelings of wonder and curiosity.

That telegram from Messrs. Bland and Frumpton had been an utter mystification to Sir Guy. Of course, he had attended to its summons without an hour's delay, for a telegram carries with it a sort of imperious command which no one ever ventures to disobey—(indeed, its general effect is, however trivial the message, to frighten people half out of their wits)—but why he was recalled to England when he flattered himself he had at last established a *pied-à-terre* in the most cheerful of quiet spots,

unknowing and unknown, he had not the remotest idea, till the sight of Captain Sydney Aylmer, apparently both hiding and flying, set him thinking. "Yet why think? why puzzle myself?—why worry? I shall know nothing till I see Bland."

And so he hurried on; eating, drinking, and sleeping as little as possible, until he reached London Bridge, where a Hansom would speedily have conveyed him to his destination, had not a sudden impediment, in the shape of Mr. Charles Topham, placed itself in the way.

"Sir Guy Bohun, by Jove! delighted to see you. Grand news, isn't it? why, you must have travelled night and day, but she won't be tried till next sessions."

Mystery upon mystery.

"Who is *she*?—what has happened? I have this moment come up from Folkstone."

"Then you know nothing? Goodness me! such an affair, no wonder you did not embrace me on the spot as I expected; but only think of your dear friend, Ponsford, *the vampire!* caught so cleverly, and by me after all! And if I had not caught her on our own count, *your* good luck would have slumbered perhaps till Doomsday!"

Still mystery upon mystery.

"Mr. Topham," said Sir Guy, rather impatiently; "I am now on my way to Bland and Frumpton's, and perhaps I had better hear what it is from them, for to tell you the truth, beyond the telegraphic message recalling me, I know nothing."

He drove off so hastily after saying these words, that Mr. Topham could only watch the retreating Hansom and wonder what effect the astounding news would have on one so calm and passionless. When it was out of sight, it occurred to him that it was fortunate he had not had time to dilate more on the subject, for that to tell all he knew would be to divulge the share Lady Bohun had had in the business, and this, to a brother-in-law, might have been awkward.

So Sir Guy drove on in his most reckless of vehicles, and in a quarter of an hour found himself ascending the well-worn stone staircase which led to the chambers of Messrs. Bland and Frumpton.

To say that the news was a thunderbolt to him would not be correct. Sir Guy had known of the certain existence of that codicil, and though its loss had left him powerless, he had never believed in its destruction, any more than he had ever entertained the faintest hope of its recovery. That

it was found, safe and valid, overpowered him for the moment, and he had not a word to say.

When, however, Mr. Bland proceeded to detail the manner in which it had been found, and, as delicately as he could, to repeat all that Ponsford had asserted in her justification, thereby so deeply implicating Lady Bohun, Sir Guy was unspeakably shocked.

The less the lawyers said, the more he saw what their sentiments must be, and though it almost startled him to feel how very little the conduct of Lady Bohun surprised *him*—(who knew her so well!)—still to think that one, bearing the spotless name of Bohun, should so have disgraced it, was a bitter pang, and the reflection that that name must soon stand before the world with its stain upon it, was almost worse to bear than the abeyance of Bohun Court!

When told that it was Mr. Blackstone's wish to see him as soon as he arrived, Sir Guy Bohun's first impulse was to decline, and to request that all communication should be carried on in writing, but on finding that the old man had made an imperative point of it, he took the advice of Messrs. Bland and Frumpton, and with feelings easier to imagine than describe, repaired forthwith to Bohun

Court, and drove up to its venerable gates, once more master of all.

* * * *

And now he stands in the large drawing-room—as yet a visitor, and treated with the scrupulous civility due to her ladyship's brother-in-law—he stands there, looking round on all the changes with a saddened eye. He had not yet dared to walk to the window; he had seen enough of the devastation as he drove up, and to look upon a wreck that even money could not replace, was more than he could bear.

In an adjoining room, an argument was going on between Mr. and Mrs. Blackstone; the latter in an agony of tears because, incomprehensibly to her, her husband insisted on the newly-found will being presented to Sir Guy Bohun by Lady Bohun herself.

“It is barbarous! it is dangerous,” she sobbed. “You know that my poor precious Phemy never liked Sir Guy even at the best of times, and now to force him into her presence when, God knows, I believe her to be in a dying state.....”

“It shall be done,” interrupted Mr. Blackstone, with compressed lips and contracted brow; “it should be done even were she so far gone as merely to have strength left to hold the paper!”

And as if fearful that he might be over-ruled, or that his resolution might fail him, he hurried at once to get over the dreaded interview, and the next moment found his hands clasped in those of Sir Guy Bohun.

"It was your own wish, my dear sir," said the latter, now really agitated; "your own express wish that I should come, otherwise, I assure you, my feelings strongly urged me to avoid a meeting so painful and so unnecessary."

"Painful, I grant you," returned Mr. Blackstone; "but not unnecessary, Sir Guy. Bland has no doubt informed you of all the circumstances of this most distressing case, and you will therefore easily imagine under what a weight of shame and anguish I now appear before you. But a task has to be performed by another besides myself. My daughter....."

His voice was suddenly choked.

"No," said Sir Guy, hastily; "that is too much. I came to see *you*, Mr. Blackstone, because you desired it; but Lady Bohun, who I hear is not well....."

"Not well? alas!....."

"Lady Bohun is the last person on whom I ought to intrude. It would be an act of positive cruelty."

“It is an act, Sir Guy, which *shall* be performed—an act on *her* part of nothing more nor less than what I call retributive justice!” exclaimed the old man, vehemently, and with a gesture, which Sir Guy mechanically obeyed, he led the way out of the room.

Sir Guy followed. He seemed in a dream; treading once more the old oaken staircases and polished galleries, he followed till suddenly he was conducted into a dimly-lighted room, and in another moment found himself, without preparation, by the bedside of Lady Bohun.

Propped up by pillows—supported by her mother, who knelt on the bed behind her—gasping for breath, the glazed and dying eyes met the horror-struck gaze of Sir Guy Bohun with the wandering look of life ebbing and intellect failing. In her grasp—for the fingers did not seem closing naturally on it—was that fatal paper.

Instinctively, he took both the wasted hands in his. For the first time in his life he felt an interest in the faded creature before him—an interest with which, in her brilliant days, she had never inspired him.

“Oh! Lady Bohun,” he exclaimed, with real sorrow in his voice, “how little I expected to find you thus!”

"Never mind," she murmured, in low, tremulous accents, "never mind, since I have lived toto give you.....this....." and she slid it into his hands. "Forgive me, Sir Guy Bohun! may you long live to enjoy what.....what I, guilty soul! have kept from you.....forgive me....."

"I do—I do, indeed!" said he, fervently, "and I only trust you may recover."

"Never," said she, faintly, "the hours are numbered.....but I have lived to see you.....and to say, that if tears of blood could be shed to wipe out my sin, I would shed them. But if deep remorse, grief, and most abject penitence can expiate it..... then I may be forgiven.....both here.....and hereafter....."

"Lady Bohun," said Sir Guy, enclosing those taper, waxen fingers, in his large firm grasp, and sinking on his knees by her side, "if it please God to restore you, this paper that I hold shall be torn to pieces before your eyes!"

She smiled feebly.

"Alas!" said she, almost inaudibly, "it is not a matter of hours now! my time will be counted now by minutes....."

"Then," he added gently, as the drooping eyelids began to close, "if it be any satisfaction to you,

let me at this solemn moment assure you, that whatever betide, Captain Aylmer shall not suffer."

A smile, so faint, that it was only just visible, passed over the face and rested there—a breath, so light that it could not be called a sigh, crossed the parted lips.....and then.....all was still.

"It is all over," said her father, turning away, and gulping down his tears; "but I thank God from my heart that I had courage to enforce it—and that she, poor soul! lived to do it."

CHAPTER XX.

SILENCE in Bohun Court—silence deeper and more profound than ever reigned there yet, for a young life had been cut off in the height of apparent health and prosperity, a father and mother were mourning (with other feelings besides grief) their only child, and Sir Guy Bohun, shut up in a distant part of the great silent house, respected their sorrow too much to allow it to be intruded upon.

So all was quiet as the grave which was preparing for its new occupant, and Sir Guy denied himself to even his most intimate friends.

The news of his return and restoration had spread like lightning, and visitors flocked to the door, but he shrank with the utmost repugnance from receiving congratulations whilst the draperies of death were still hanging over the coffin containing the remains of Lady Bohun. The whole scene

had been so rapid, and so shocking, that he required time to recover himself, and having also a difficult and a delicate part to play whilst the bereaved parents were still beneath his roof, he came to the determination, after much consideration, quietly to leave Bohun Court, after the funeral, without their knowledge, and then to write and beg them to consider it their home as long as they would remain there.

But no sooner were the first effects of the blow over, than nothing would satisfy Mr. Blackstone but he must go up to town and find out everything he possibly could about Ponsford. His feverish anxiety to know how much of her wretched secret she had divulged, and how far it had spread, kept him in a state of fearful excitement night and day. Poor man, he little knew that wherever he appeared, the subject, which was in every mouth, was instantly turned, and every lip was closed when people said, as he approached, that that was the father of Lady Bohun. He had but one friend whose insatiable love of talking overcame all tact, delicacy, feeling, or discretion, and that was Mr. Charles Topham.

Happening by chance to meet the old man one day in the street, and being tempted beyond endurance by his questions, he launched out and gave

him the whole story of Ponsford's behaviour on her arrest and during her imprisonment, and wound up by exclaiming, "She is to be tried at the Old Bailey on Thursday next. I wouldn't miss it for the world, if I were you. Of course, I shall be there as one of the witnesses, and my wife, too. I've had half the doctors in London to keep her up to the mark for the occasion. But you *must* go, Mr. Blackstone, and surely Sir Guy will hear her tried? I should think it would be one of the happiest moments of his life when he hears Ponsford called 'Prisoner at the bar!'"

Mr. Blackstone went home rejoicing. "He doesn't know!" muttered he to himself, as he rubbed his hands with pitiable glee; "he doesn't know! or he never would have asked *me*, of all people in the universe, to go and see Ponsford tried!"

The trial came on—all London were on the *qui vive*—every paper teemed with its singular details and the curious secrets it brought to light; but never throughout the whole five days that it lasted, was the name of Bohun breathed except once, when the prisoner uttered it, apparently preparatory to making some communication regarding Lady Bohun, and then, from the dense crowd a voice was sud-

denly heard to exclaim, "Silence, woman! *she is dead!*"

Whoever spoke, instantly left the court, but then, and then only, did the prisoner's immoveable countenance change. Face and lips turned deadly pale, and she started visibly. Whispers ran round the masses of that immense assembly, and many reached her ear, but she had by that time recovered herself, and bore herself as though she still stood, pampered, petted, trusted, and feared, the mistress of Bohun Court and all its inhabitants, contemptuously calm!

And so she stood till the end; yes, and beyond the end, too; for she heard the word "Guilty" pronounced without a muscle of her countenance moving, and with clear, open eyes, and placidly closed lips, she heard her sentence loudly proclaimed,

"Transportation for life!"

* * * *

Five years now, since we first saw Bohun Court preparing for a bride. Five years since Sir Felix took his third wife, young, gay, and beautiful, into the grand, though sombre rooms, of the home she never appreciated.

But Bohun Court is now preparing for another Lady Bohun; one who has known and loved it all

her life with a love as strong as ever a true-born Bohun felt ; one neither so young, nor so gay, nor so beautiful as she who lies beneath the yews in Bohun churchyard, but young enough and fair enough for Sir Guy.

Miss Maynard, who at five-and-twenty was much too spirited a damsel to suit the refined taste of the man whom she always delighted to tease and shock by her wild manners and startling speeches, was now, at five-and-thirty, sobered down into an agreeable, intelligent woman, still frank and free-hearted as ever, but quieted by time and improved by age, till Sir Guy was fain to acknowledge to himself one day that he and Bohun Court would be all the better for a wife, and that no wife would suit him so well as his old friend "Jem," in spite of the many younger and fairer candidates who fluttered round him.

But he never altered the interior arrangements of the old house, made during the luxurious reign of Euphemia Lady Bohun ; for he never thought of her without a sigh of regret, never saw her in his mind's eye but as he saw her last, dying and repentant, and treated her memory with a sort of superstitious respect ; why, no one could tell : but the rooms she had decorated and adorned, the furniture she had planned, the flower-beds she had

laid out, all were left as she left them—and yet, if her name were suddenly mentioned in his presence, a shudder would come over him, and he used to tell his wife in confidence that he would rather never talk of her.

“And I don’t wonder at it!” was her honest exclamation to a friend; “for when I think of the days when she and Ponsford used to glide about these rooms, I declare it makes my flesh creep!”

One alteration only was made before Sir Guy and his bride took possession—the whitewash was condemned; and as they drove up beneath the arches of flowers and evergreens, there stood the fine old grand baronial hall, grim and gray as it was in days of yore—everything the same, except the ivy.

* * * *

There are two actors in this drama who, though not carrying about with them the Bohun name, still bear so close an affinity to it, as to excite either notice, curiosity, or interest wherever they go, and they are always moving about on the face of society; one, a young fair man, with long light beard and moustaches.

“I thought he had been obliged to cut and run,” was the observation when first he re-appeared at his clubs, and the answer was, “Oh! Sir Guy

Bohun set him all right again. He was Lady Bohun's husband."

The other individual was an old white-haired man, bent and prematurely aged, with a face of extreme anxiety, and light blue watery eyes, always peering inquiringly into people's faces. If any one seemed attracted by his looks, he would immediately address them; his words were very few, and the questions always the same:

"May I ask.....is the sentence known yet?..... and in the course of the trial did she mention the name of Bohun?"

And then the servant in charge would hurry him away, and you would see him stop some one else with the same weary repetition, and this went on day after day, and month after month, till the worn-out body followed the broken heart and the lost mind, and it happened just as his daughter, Lady Bohun, had prophesied—it killed him.

THE END.

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